

PEOPLE AND IDEAS

Savitribai

Journey of a Trailblazer



AN AZIM PREMJI UNIVERSITY PUBLICATION



Azim Premji
University

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Foreword

Savitribai Phule's name is often missed, while accounting for history and the people who shaped the norms of society towards its betterment. While Jotirao Phule is widely revered for his revolutionary work of social reform and education, it is often missed that Savitribai was an equal partner in each and every one of his ventures of social reform. It is important to acknowledge Savitribai not merely as Jotirao's wife. In her own right, Savitribai was a woman ahead of her times, in thought and action, with the courage and sensitivity to lead a life defined by choices often ridiculed or aggressively opposed by society and its institutionalized ways.

This graphic novel is an attempt to take the reader through Savitribai's life, her ideas and thinking which shaped the very visible and impactful work she accomplished along with Jotirao. Obtaining an education after being married at the age of 9, Savitribai went on to become one of the first few women teachers in India. Together, the couple then started a school for girls (widely considered the first such school for girls) – a space of empowerment and equality, where no discrimination was allowed room and the running of which succeeded despite opposition from every quarter. These pathbreaking ventures were but the beginnings of further work driven by selfless devotion to service of the oppressed and destitute, and a vision of equality, fairness, and justice. They believed that education is the remedy for backward thinking and for creating equal opportunities.

We decided to evoke the richness of Savitribai's life and ideals through the folk art form of Patua from West Bengal, traditionally a storytelling form. The beautiful illustrations that make this graphic novel are from the hands of Sumon Chitrakar – a Patua artist from Midnapore. The parallel between much of Patua depicting stories of Durga or the goddess mother's strength and power, and the quiet strength in Savitribai's eyes is too apt to be missed.

The process of creating this and learning about Savitribai was inspiring for us, and affirmed the power and domino effect that one person's conviction can have, despite social categories being stacked against her, the power one brings to a partnership, and the self-effacing nature of true service. We hope you also find motivation in this colourful narration.

Medha Sundar, Azim Premji University, Bangalore

Maharashtra in the 19th century

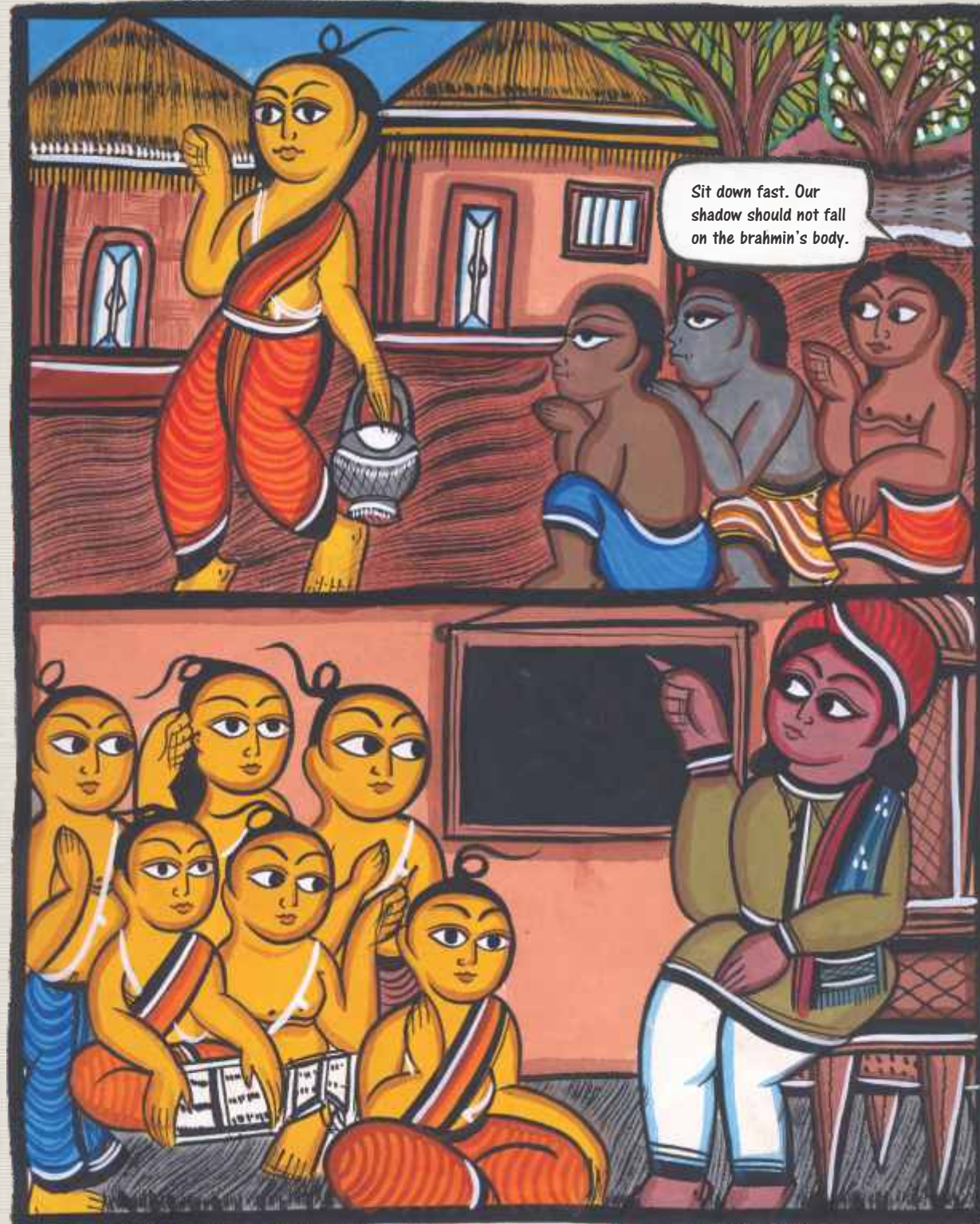
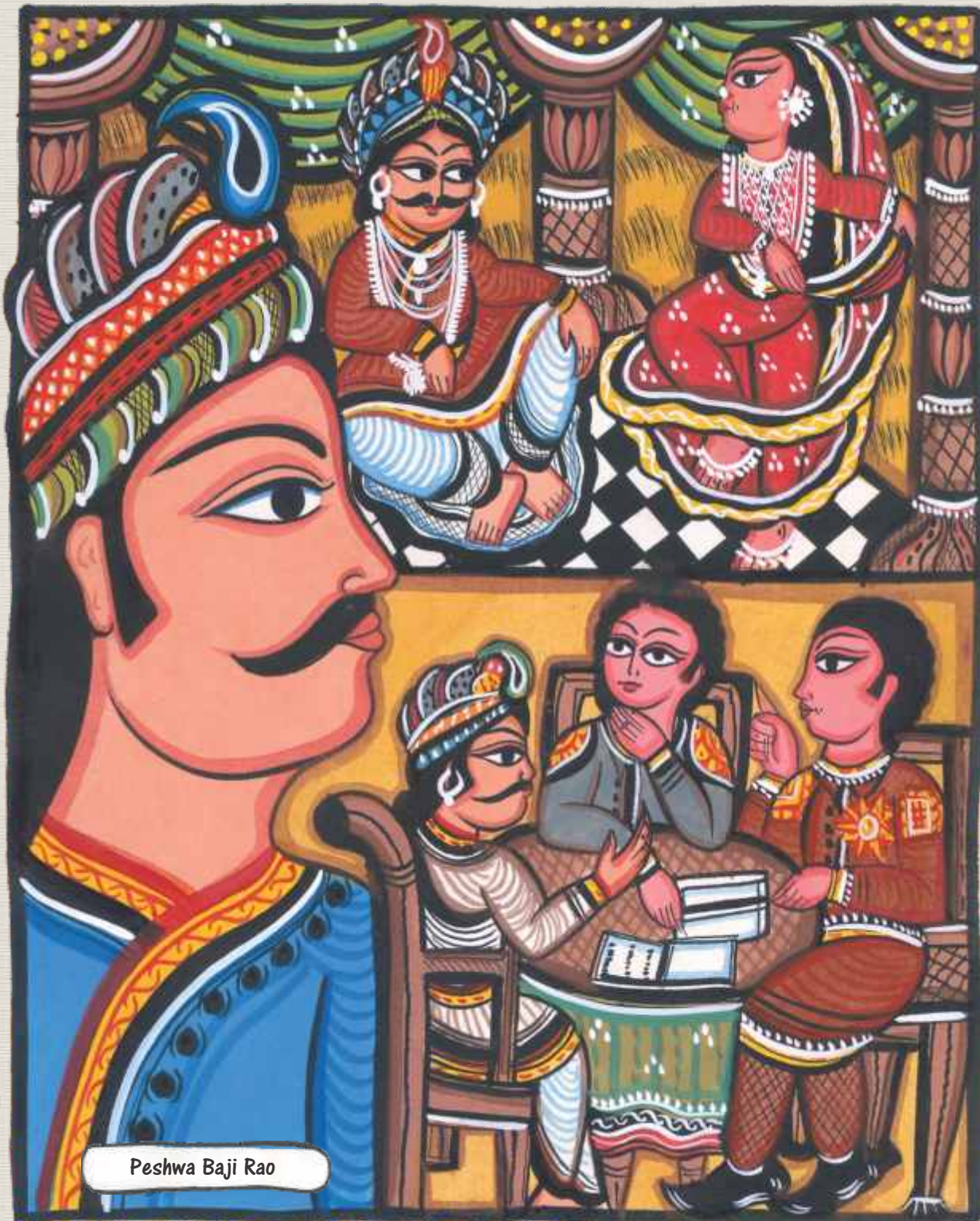
The Peshwa Bajirao II's rule was marked by inefficient administration and wasteful expenditure. As a Peshwa, he made a terrible ruler. He delighted in humiliating his feudatories, seizing their estates on flimsy pretexts, and imagined that their womenfolk too belonged to him.



Societal mores were hidebound and conservative. The caste system was very rigid. The lower castes, Mahars, Mangs, Chambhars, Bhangi, Dhedds, could not even cross paths with people of higher castes.



The small Brahman community, constituting less than five percent of the population of the Maharashtra region, accepted Western education and used that education to gain access to professions and positions in the government service that were open to Indians.

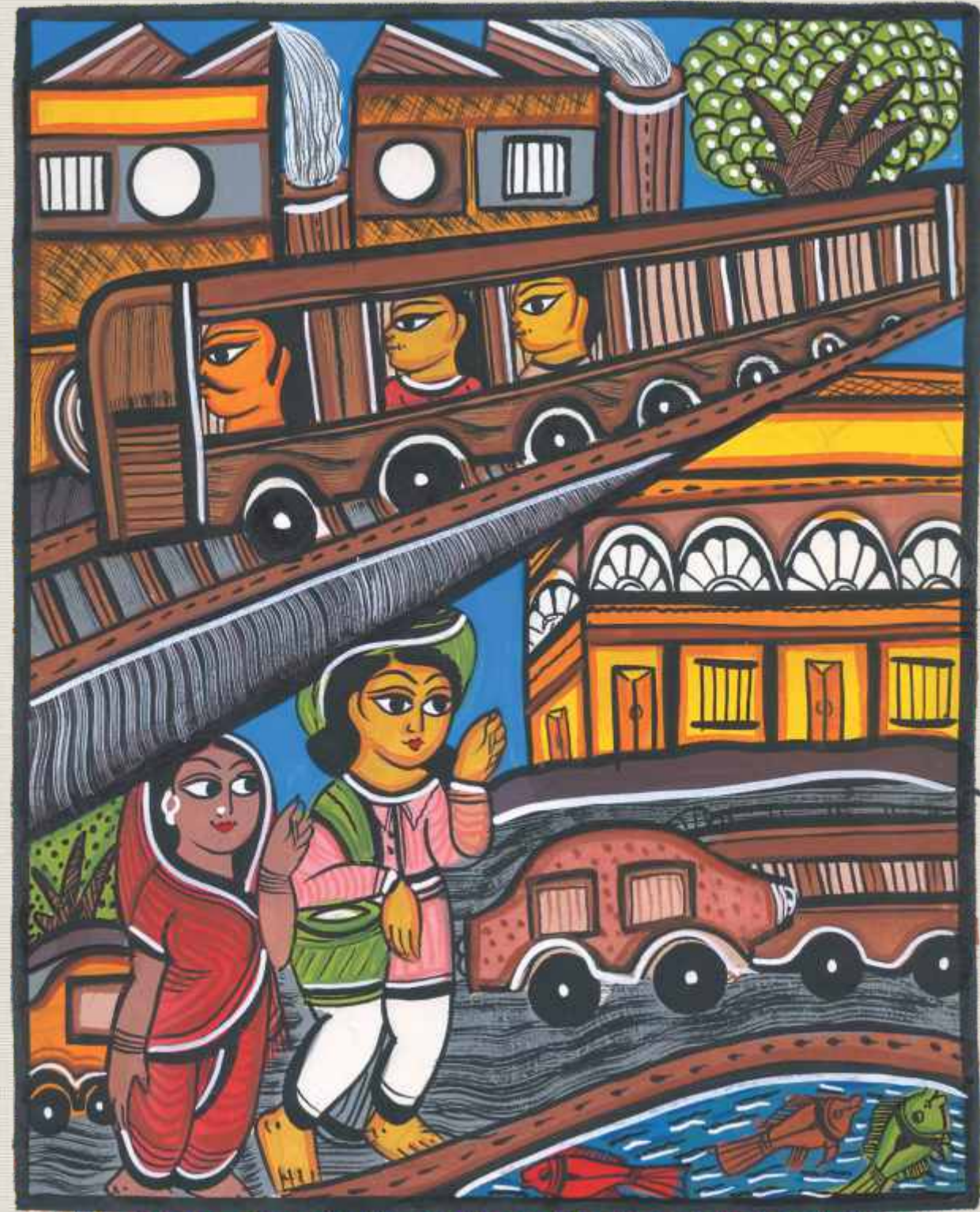


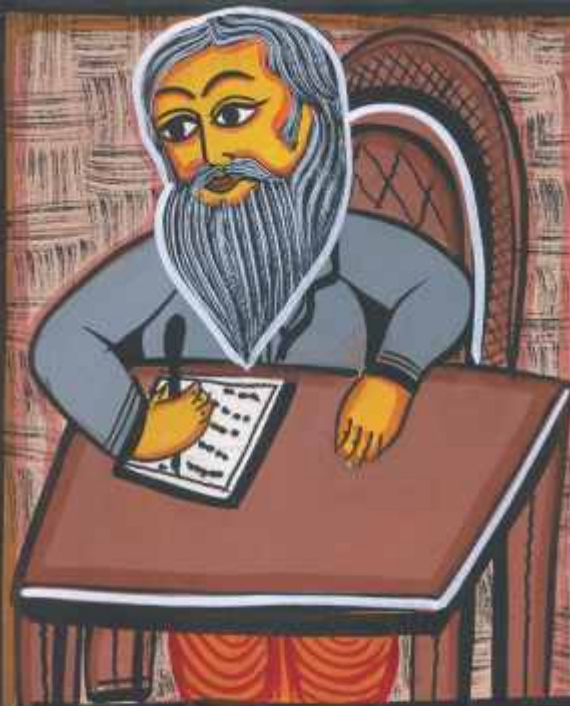
Although the British criticized the caste system, they were reluctant to do anything drastic that would threaten the continuation of their rule over India, especially after the revolt of 1857.

But clouds of change were appearing on the horizon towards the middle of the 19th century. There was a spread of Western education. Indian students were introduced to the ideas of the Enlightenment, the importance of reason, human autonomy, equality of all humans, and secularism.

The growth of industry, railways, and communication led to the growth of urban centres.

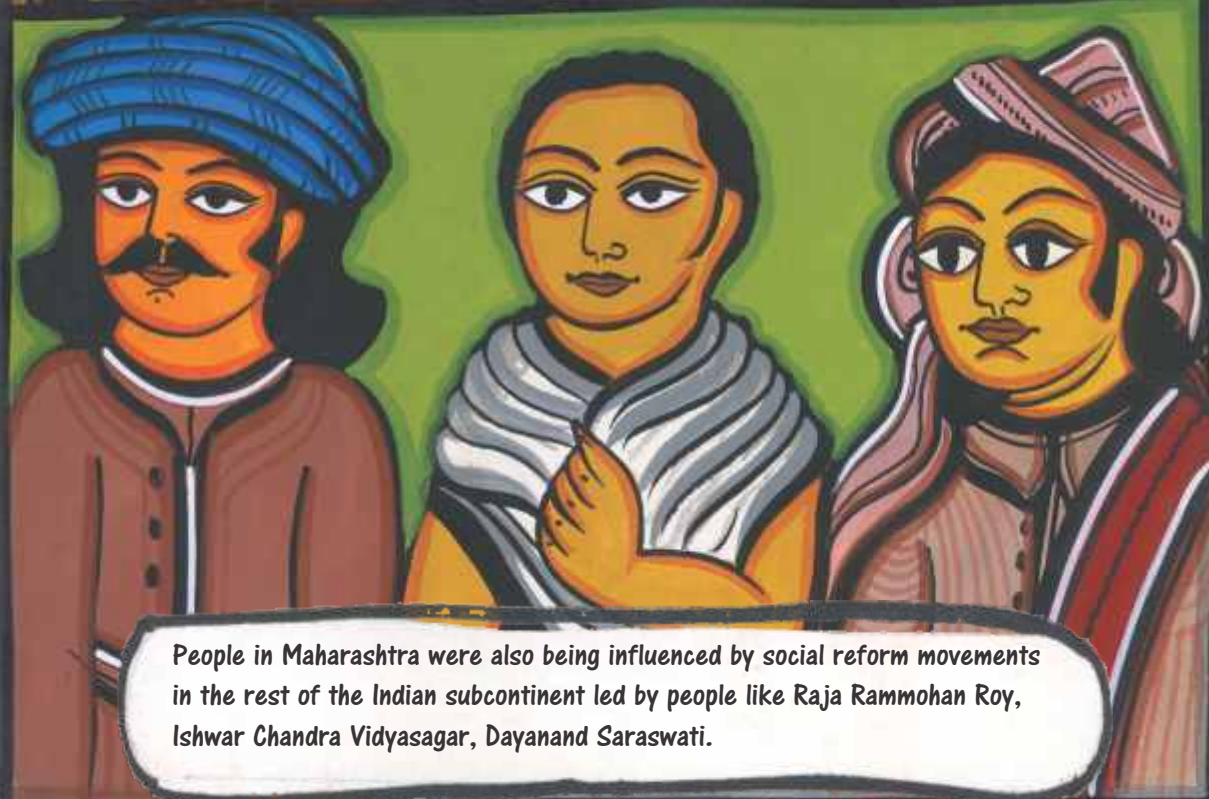
People in these urban centres were less ghettoized than people in the villages and acquired a new sense of public life.





Governor General Ripon wrote to Secretary of State Gladstone in 1882:

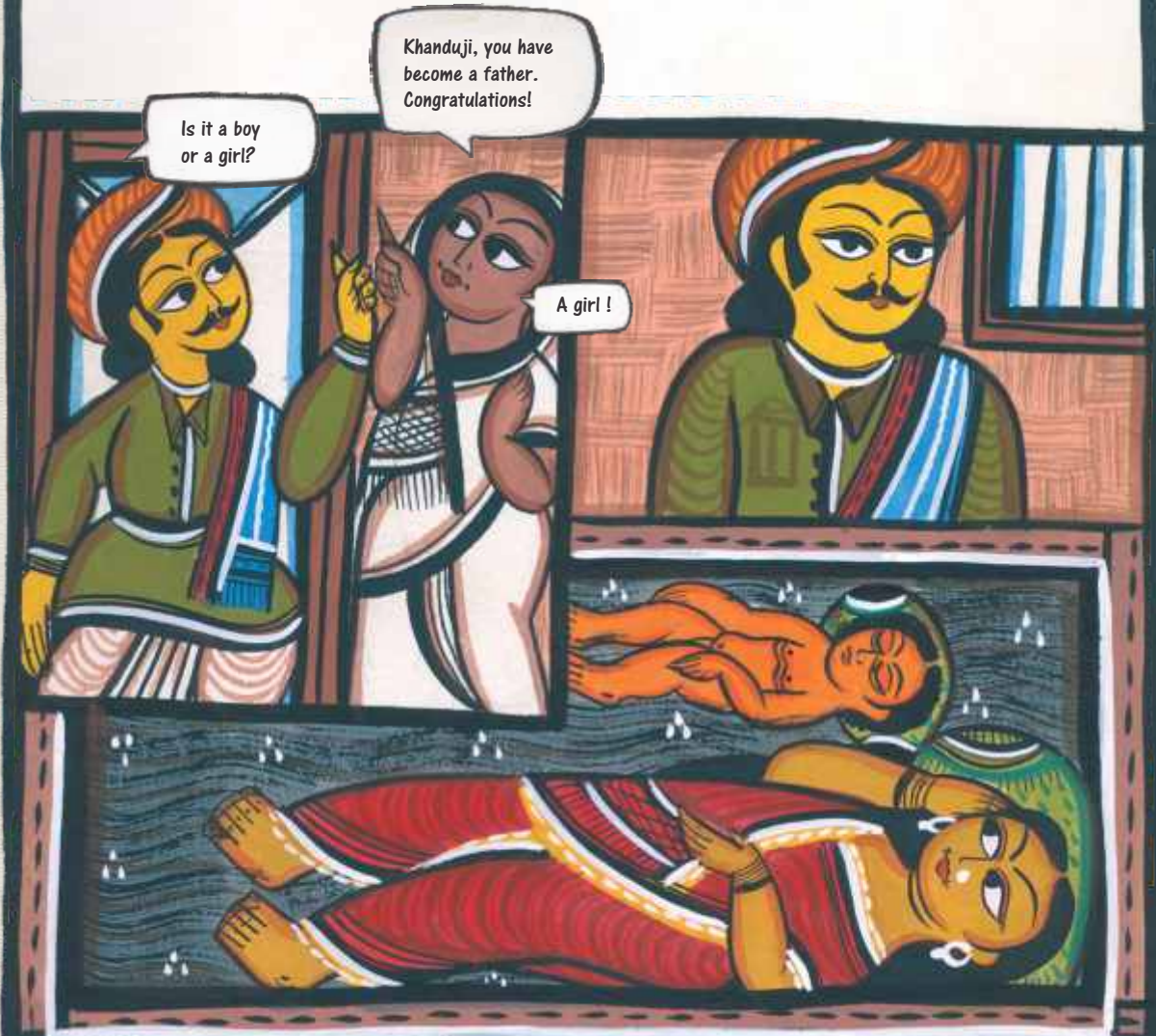
"No one who watches the signs of the times in this country with even moderate care can doubt that we have entered upon a period of change: the spread of education, the existing and increasing influence of a free Press, the substitution of legal for discretionary administration, the progress of railways, telegraph, etc., the easier communication with Europe, and the more ready influx of European ideas, are now beginning to produce a marked effect upon the people: new ideas are springing up, new aspirations are being called forth, the power of public opinion is growing and strengthening from day to day, and a movement has begun which will advance with greater rapidity and force every year."



People in Maharashtra were also being influenced by social reform movements in the rest of the Indian subcontinent led by people like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Dayanand Saraswati.

It was in this era that Savitribai Phule was born and raised.

Her story began in a small village called Naigaon in Satara district on January 3, 1831, in the house of Khanduji Newase.

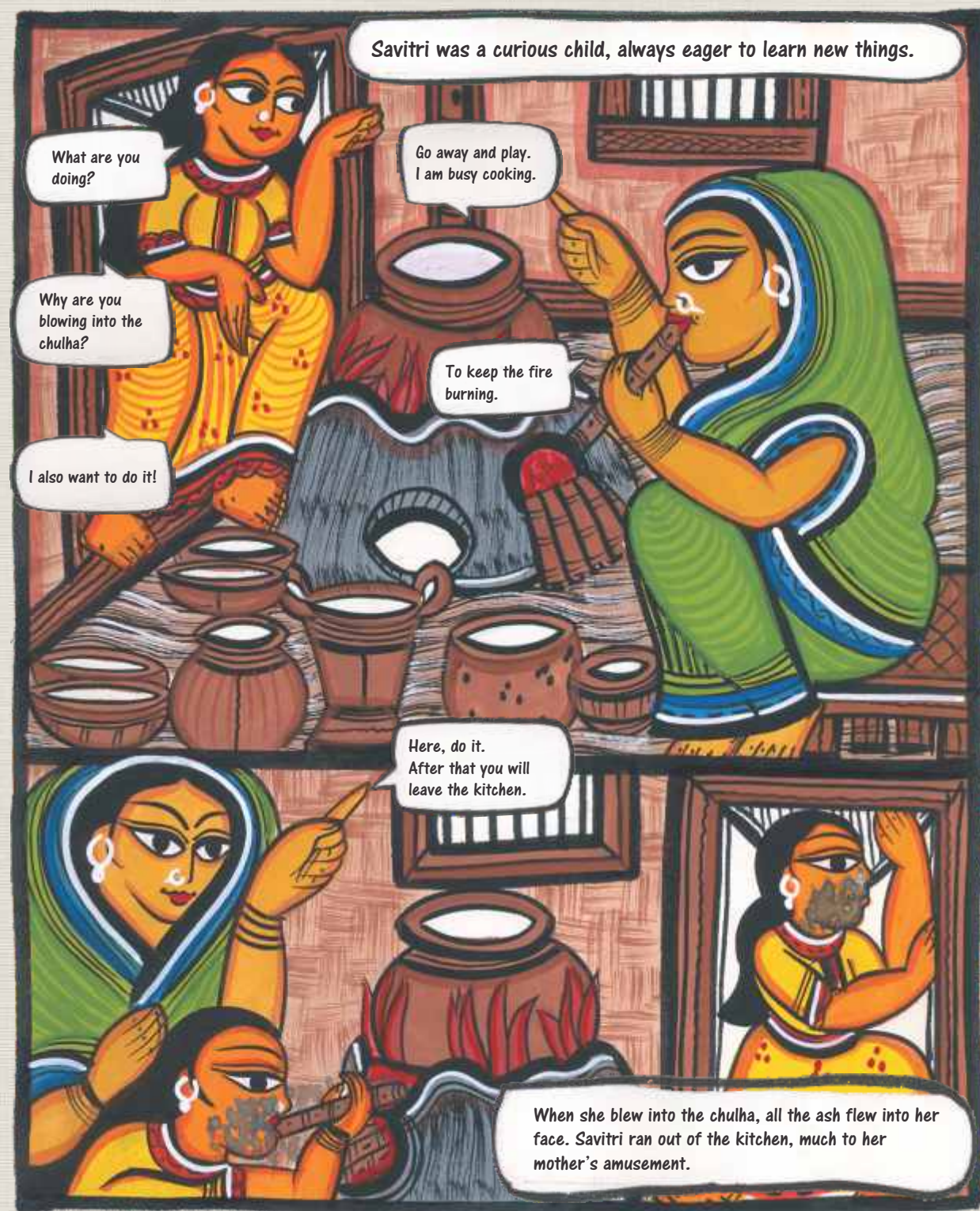
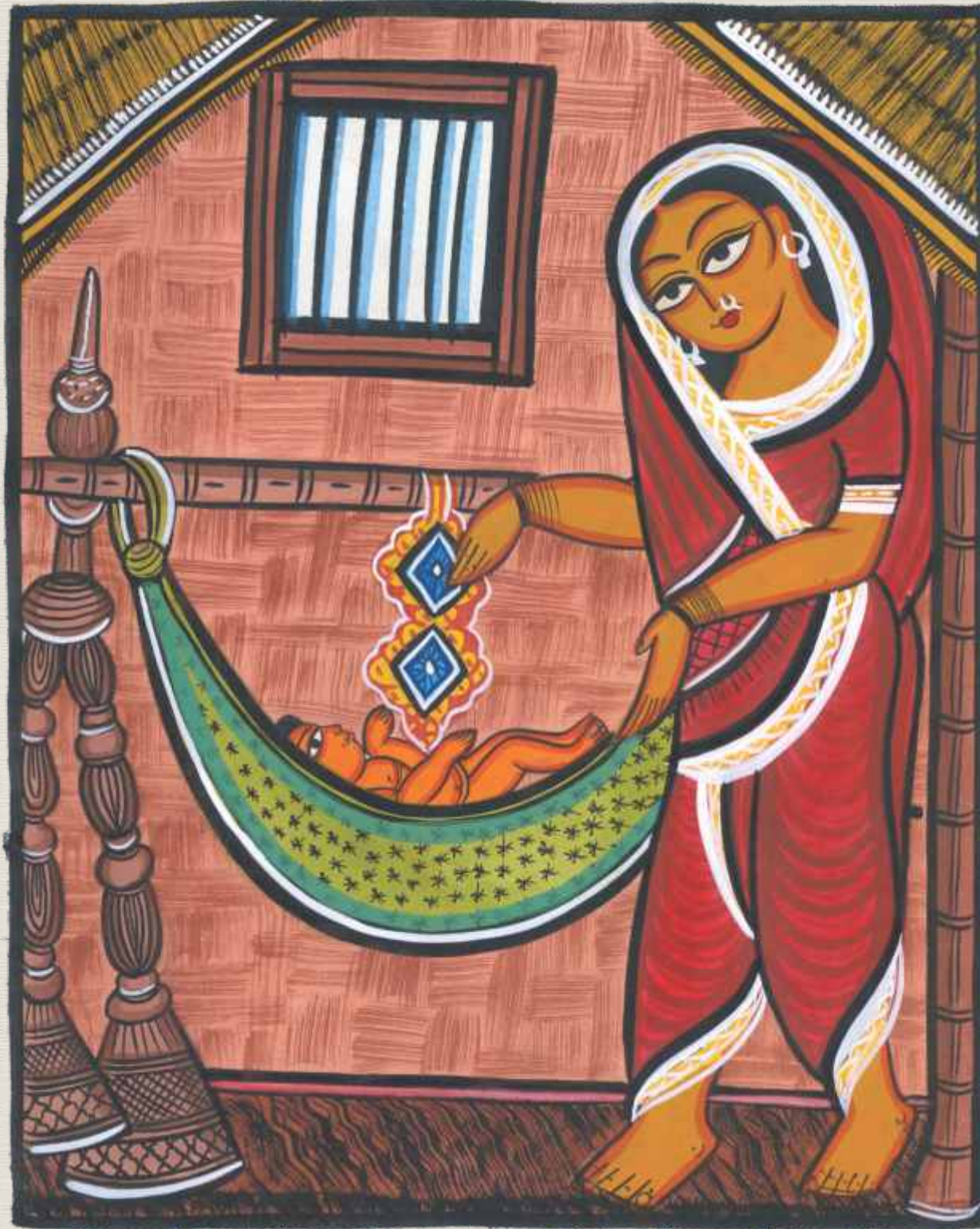


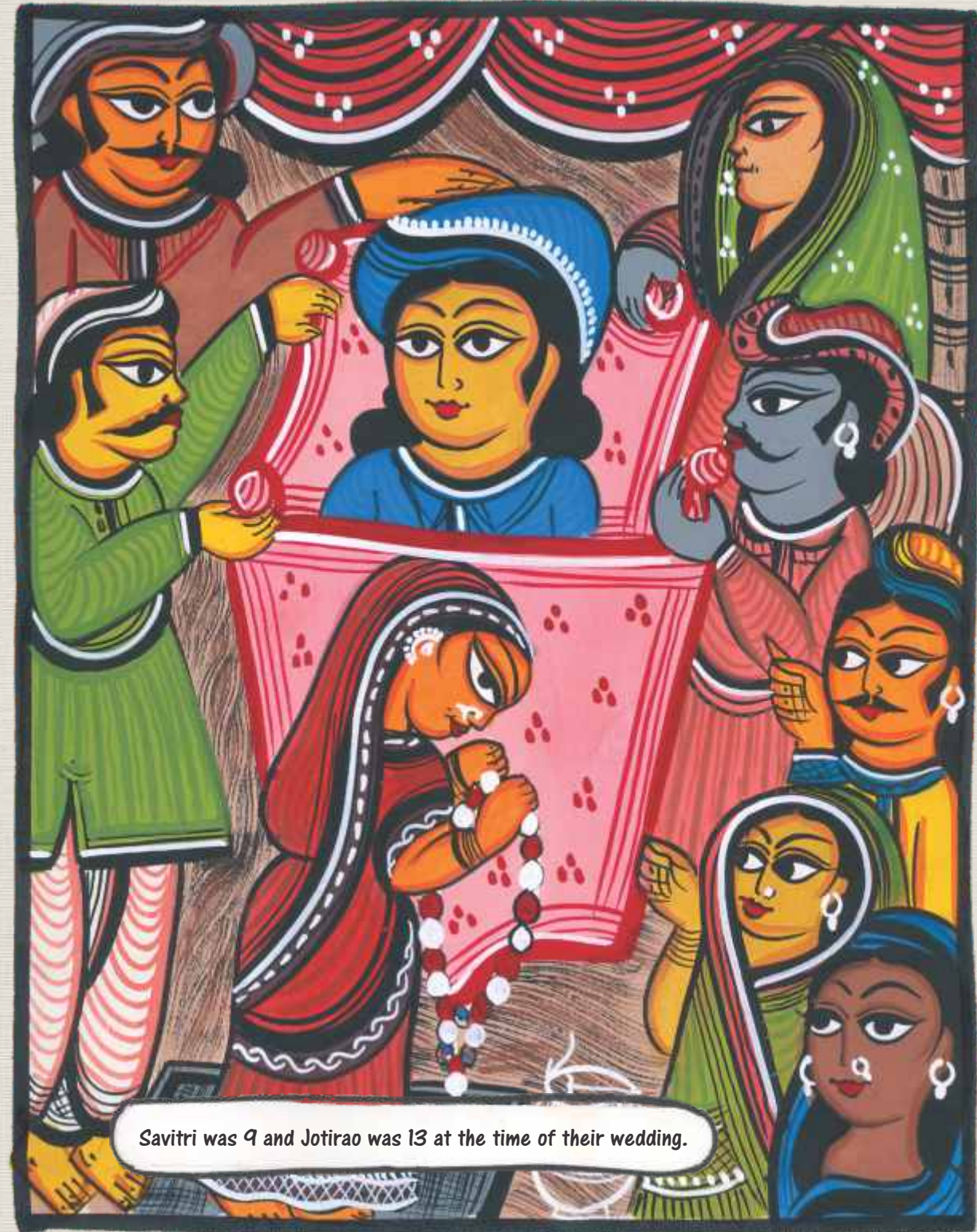
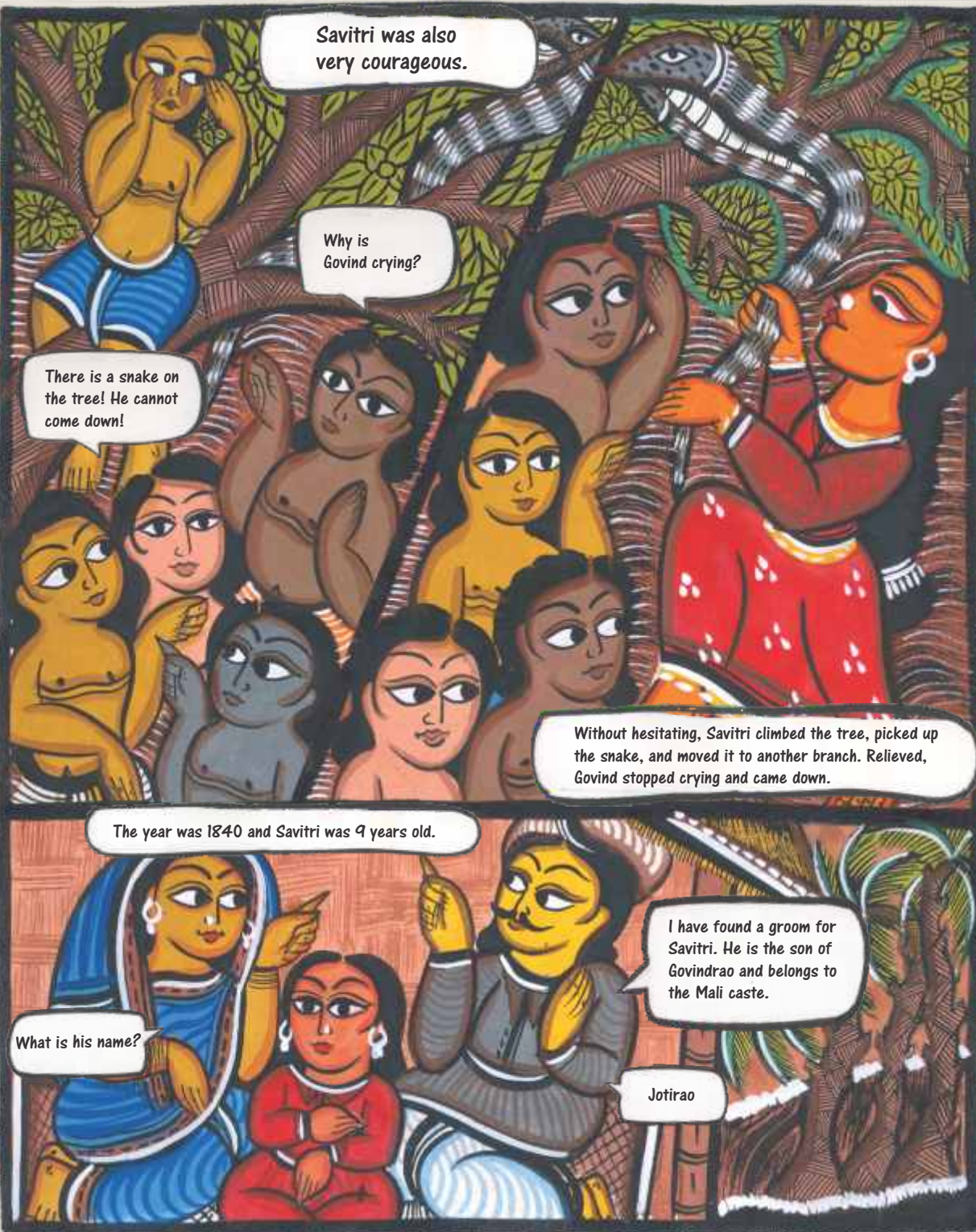
Khanduji, you have become a father. Congratulations!

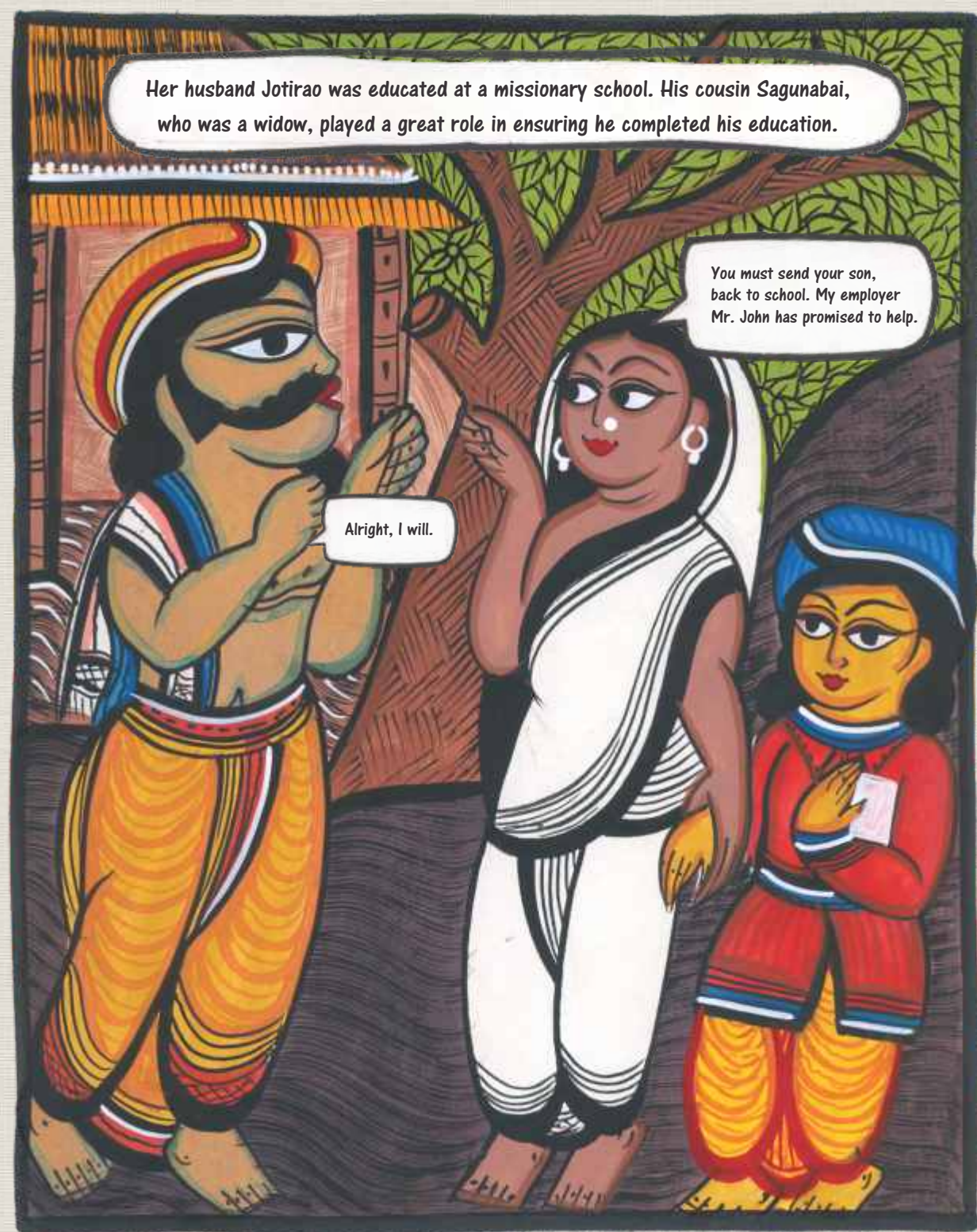
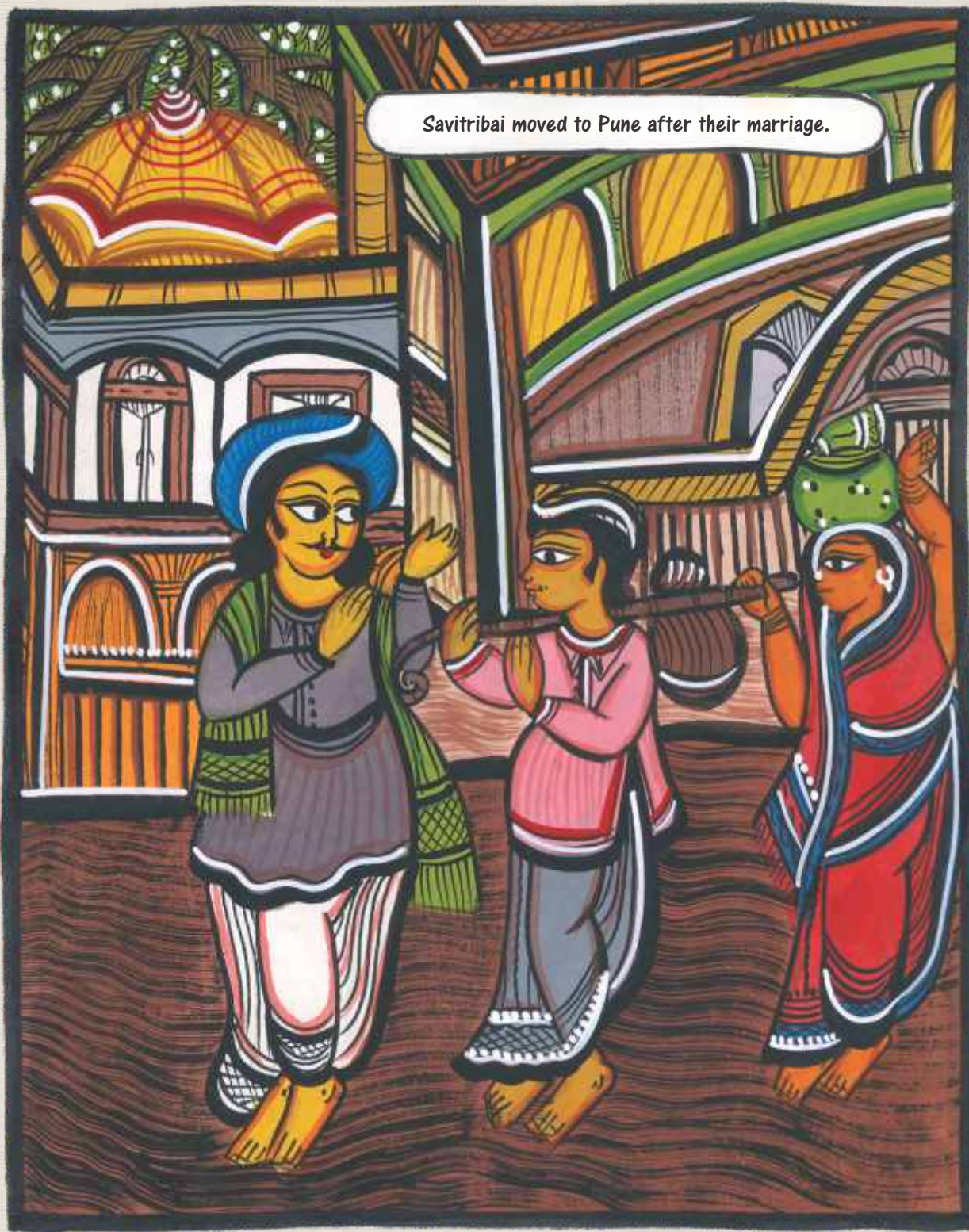
Is it a boy or a girl?

A girl !

The child was named Savitri.







Jotirao was greatly influenced by the ideas of Thomas Paine.

He was struck by the lack of educational opportunities for women.

"I believe in the equality of man...
Endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy...
The World is my country, all mankind are my brethren,
and to do good is my religion..."

Jotirao started educating his wife.

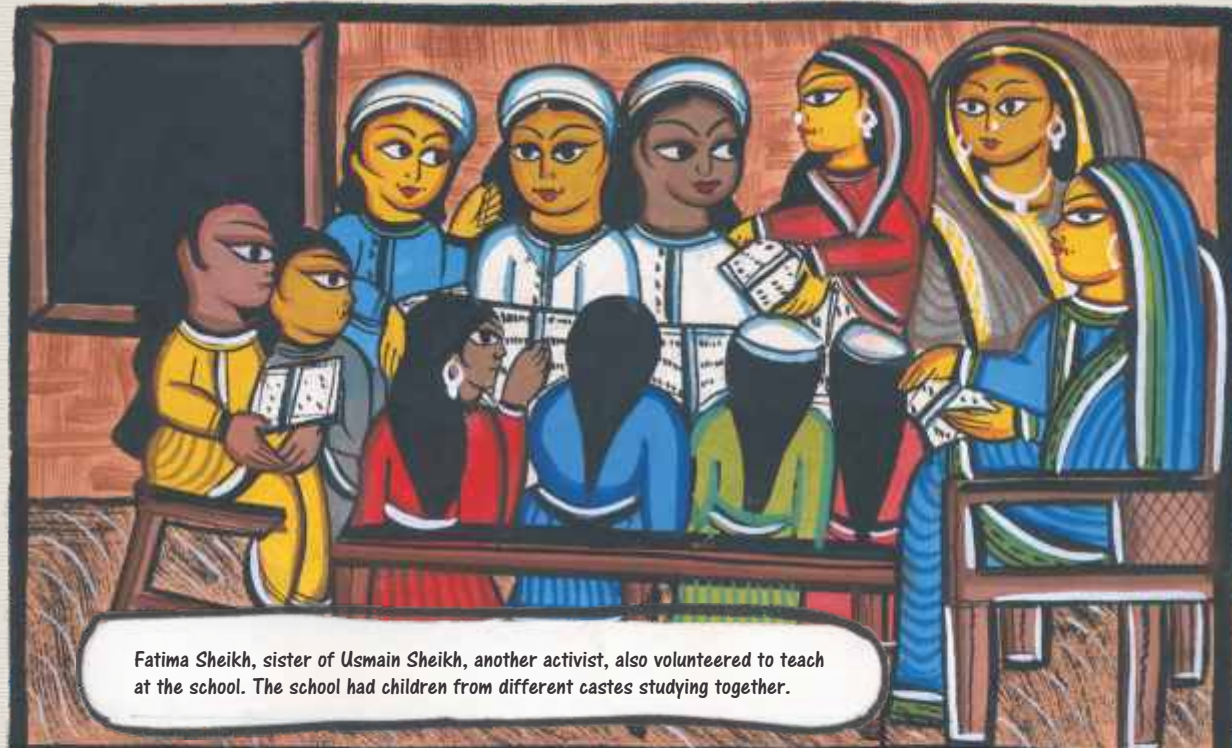
I have observed that there are no indigenous
schools for girls. It is quite a pity because unless
the state of women in this country is improved, we
will not progress. We should start a girls' school.

TEACHER TRAINING INSTITUTE

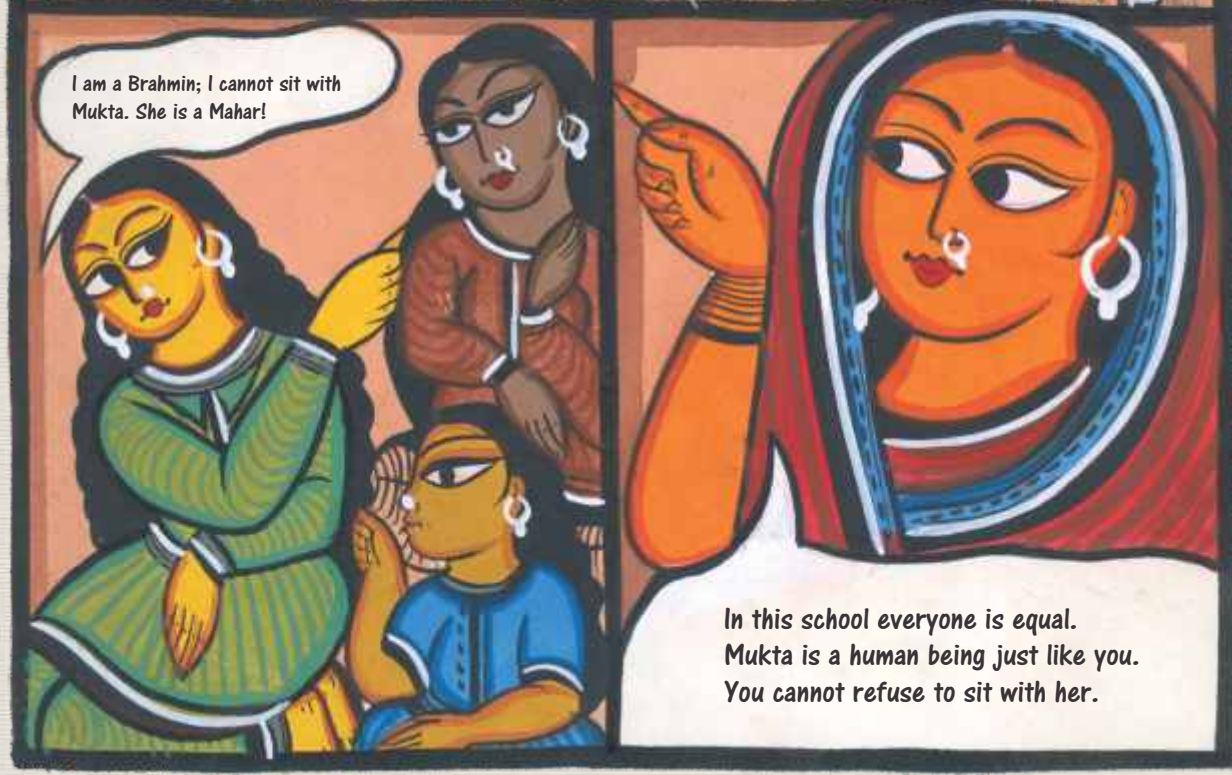
Savitribai then went to Mrs. Farar's Institution at Ahmednagar
and Narman School in Pune to train as a teacher.

SCHOOL FOR GIRLS

In 1848, Jotirao Phule opened a school for girls in Bhidewada in Pune. Savitribai taught at this school and was its Headmistress.

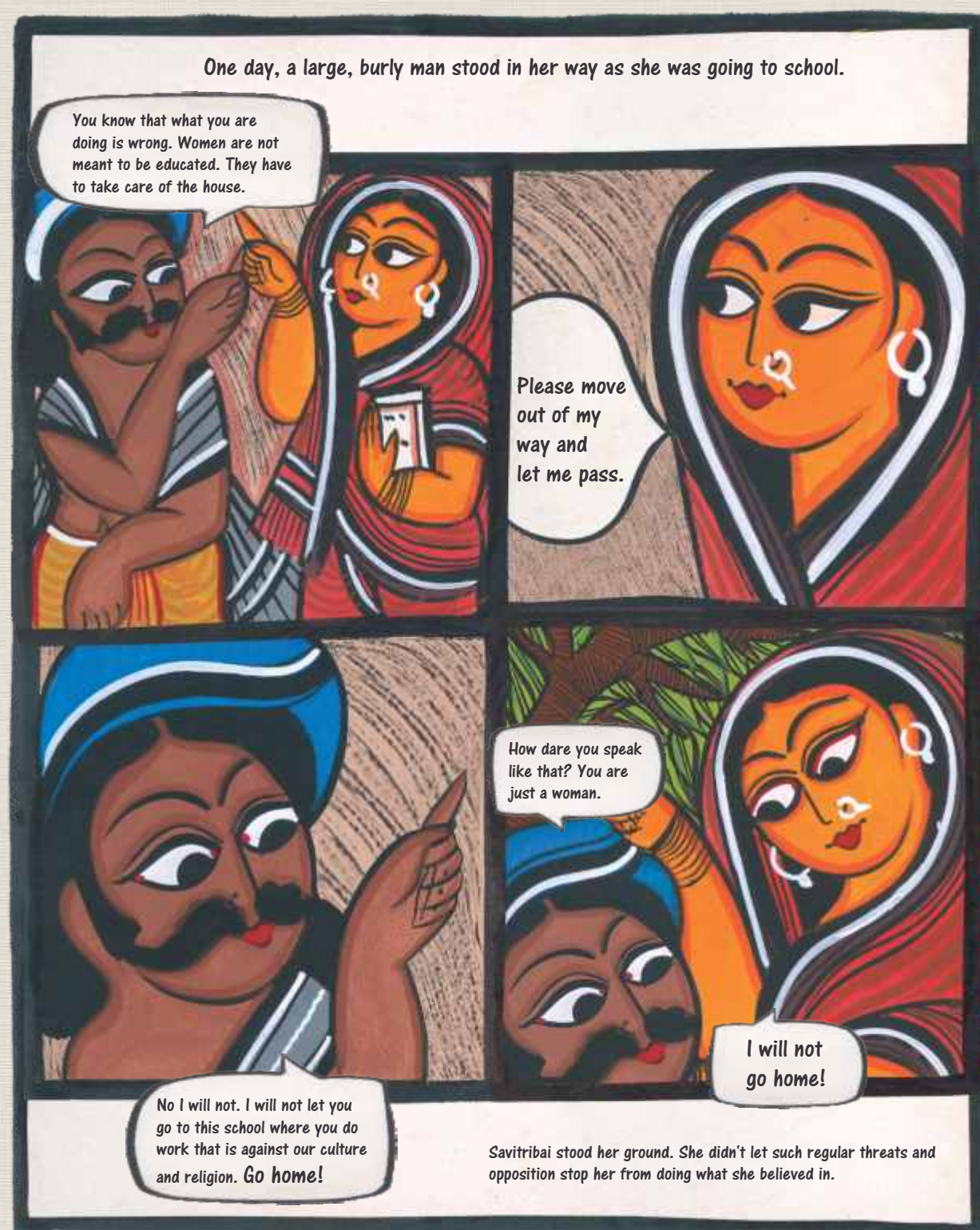
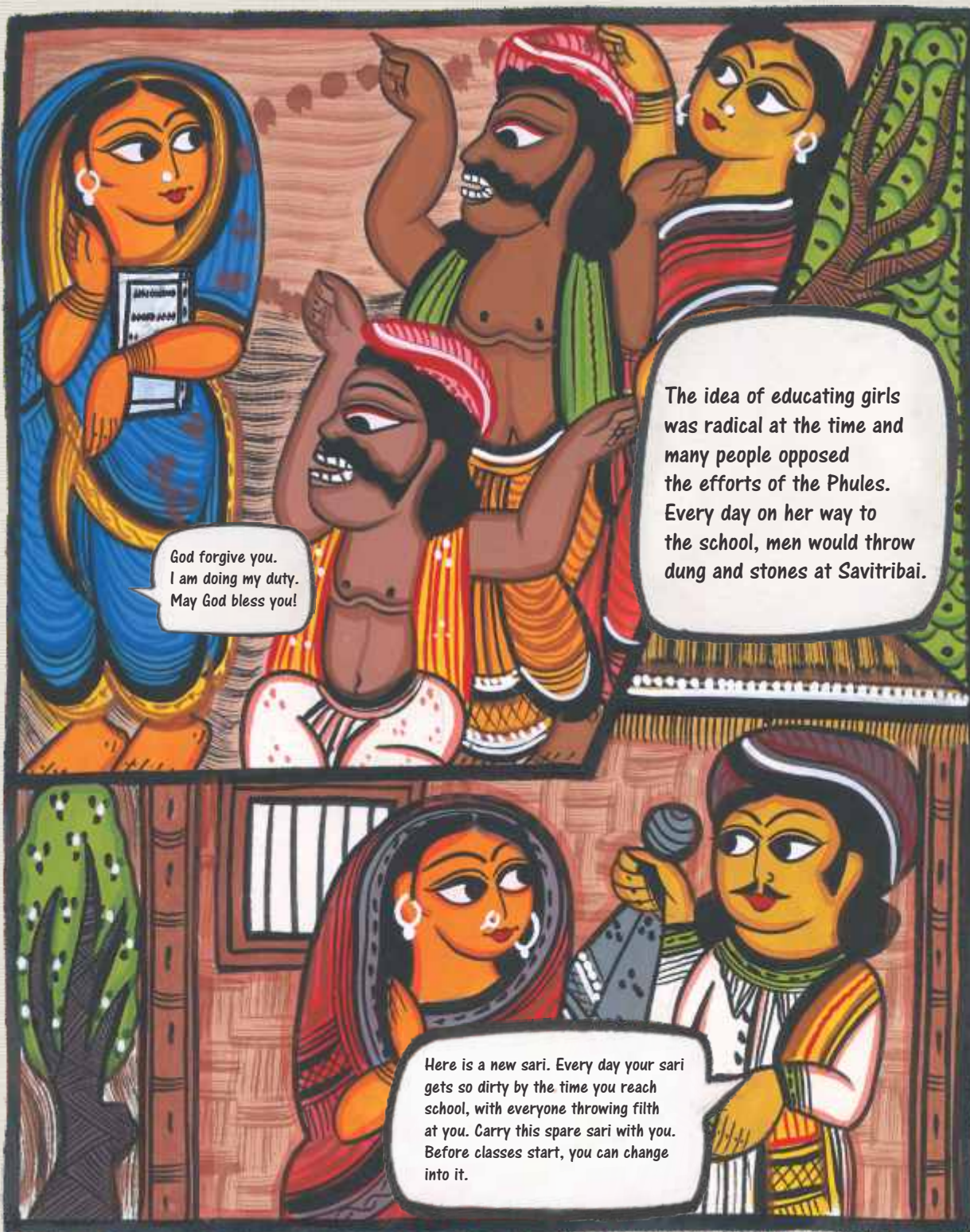


Fatima Sheikh, sister of Usmain Sheikh, another activist, also volunteered to teach at the school. The school had children from different castes studying together.



I am a Brahmin; I cannot sit with Mukta. She is a Mahar!

In this school everyone is equal. Mukta is a human being just like you. You cannot refuse to sit with her.



Savitribai stood her ground. She didn't let such regular threats and opposition stop her from doing what she believed in.

The odds were stacked against the Phules.

Even nationalists like Tilak opposed education for girls.

People voiced their opposition to the work of the Phules to Govindrao, Jotirao's father. They pressurized him to make them stop their work or drive them out of his house.



You have to stop running this girls' school. Everyone disapproves of it.

Even at the risk of life I shall not give up the cause.

Then go where you like but leave my house together with your wife. I cannot live under the same roof as the both of you.

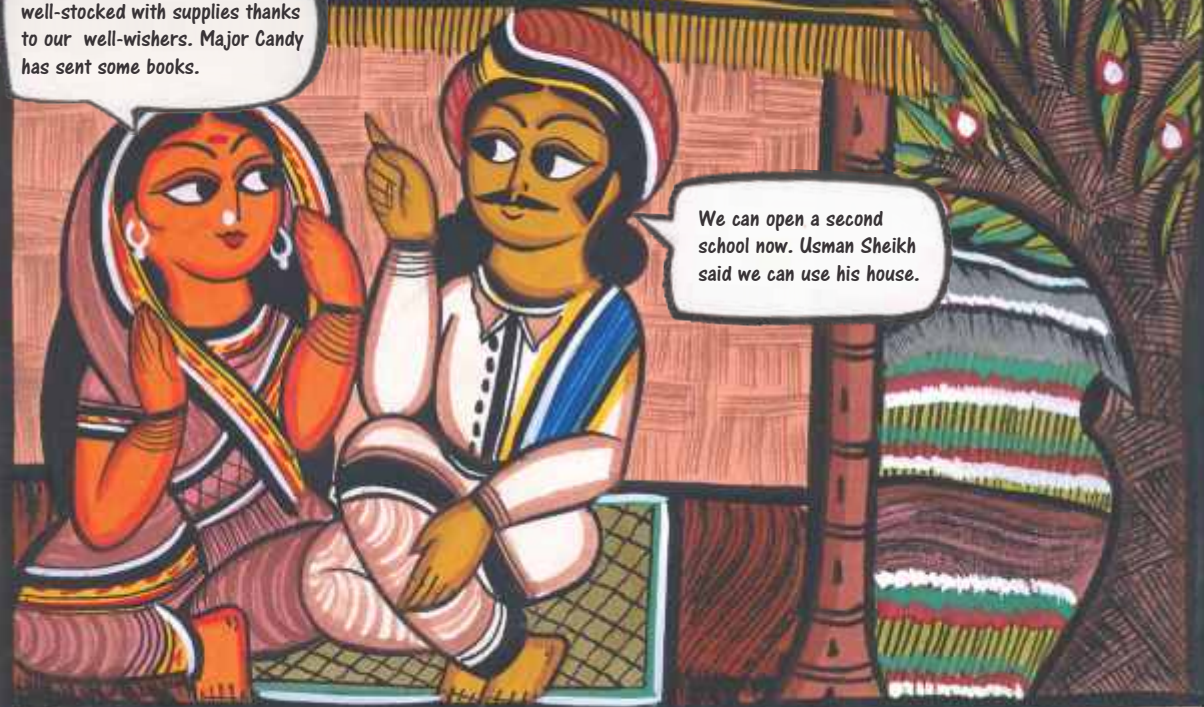
Undeterred and true to their cause, Jotiba and Savitribai left Govindrao's house.



The Phules' educational initiatives picked up steam.

We are fortunate. Our school is well-stocked with supplies thanks to our well-wishers. Major Candy has sent some books.

We can open a second school now. Usman Sheikh said we can use his house.



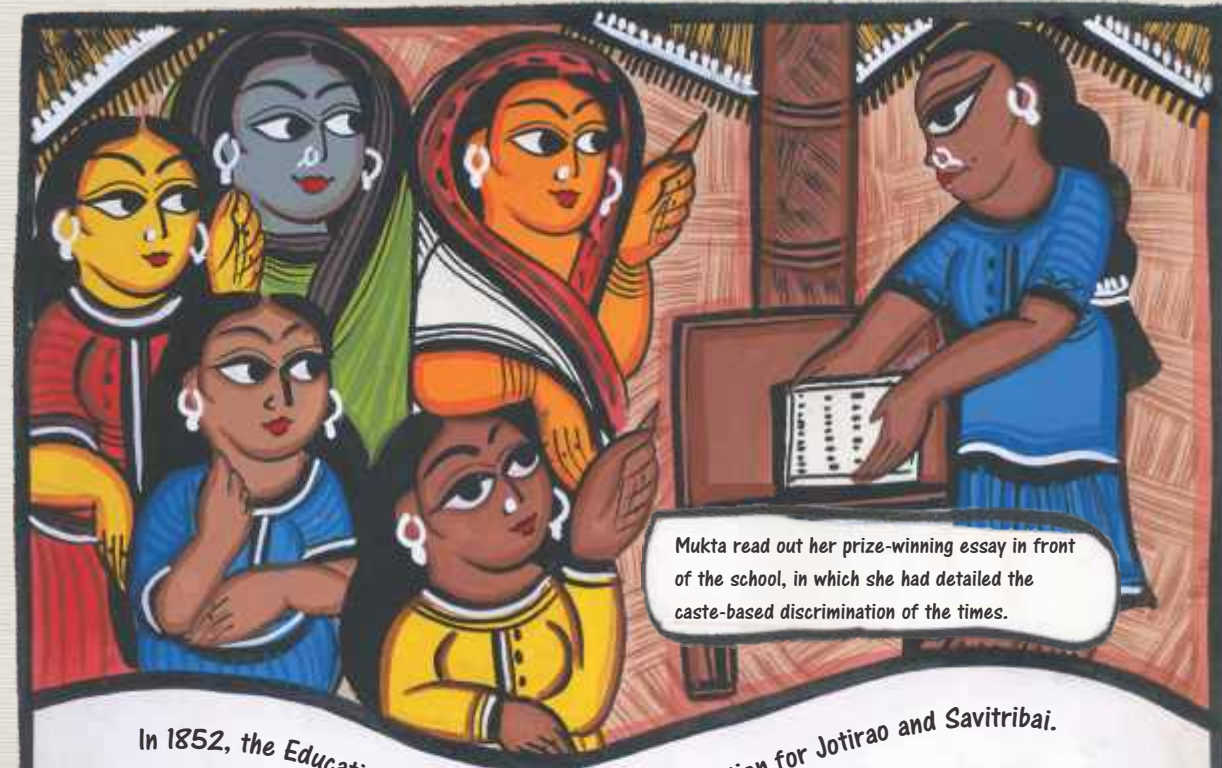
The School Committee Report

"The state of the school funds has compelled the Committee to appoint teachers on small salaries, who soon give up when they find better appointment... Savitribai, the school headmistress, has nobly volunteered to devote herself to the improvement of female education without remuneration. We hope that as knowledge advances, the people of this country will be awakened to the advantages of female education and will cordially assist in all such plans calculated to improve the condition of those girls."

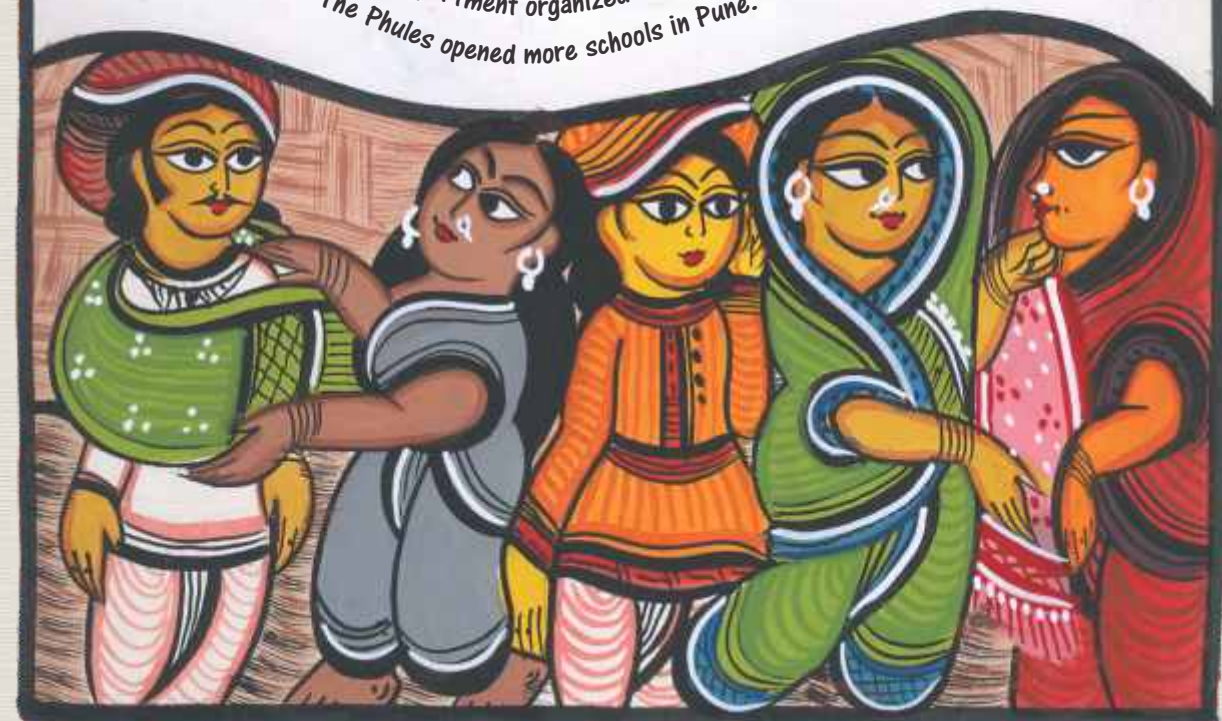
Report in 'The Poona Observer' on May 29, 1852:

"The number of girl students in Jotirao's school is ten times more than the number of boys studying in the government schools. This is because the system for teaching girls is far superior to what is available for boys in government schools. If this situation continues, then the girls from Jotirao's school will prove superior to the boys from the government schools and they feel that in the coming examinations, they can really achieve a big victory. If the Government Education Board does not do something about this soon, seeing these women outshine the men will make us hang our heads in shame."

At a school function, a little girl, Mukta is receiving a prize.



In 1852, the Education Department organized a felicitation for Jotirao and Savitribai. The Phules opened more schools in Pune.



They also started a hostel for children who lived outside Pune.

One of the students who lived there, Laxman Karadi Jaaya, described it in his memoirs: "I have not seen another woman as kind and loving as Savitribai. She gave us more love than even a mother could."

Due to this, their expenses rose.

One should not spend so much.

What do we have to take with us when we die?

Another student, Mahadu Sahadu Waghole wrote: "Savitribai was very generous, and her heart was full of kindness. She would be very compassionate to the poor and the needy. She would constantly give the gift of food; she would offer everyone meals. If she saw tattered clothes on the body of poor women, she would give them saris from her own house."

Their work started going beyond education.

I heard something very upsetting today. You remember Kashibai, the woman who worked in my friend Govande's house?

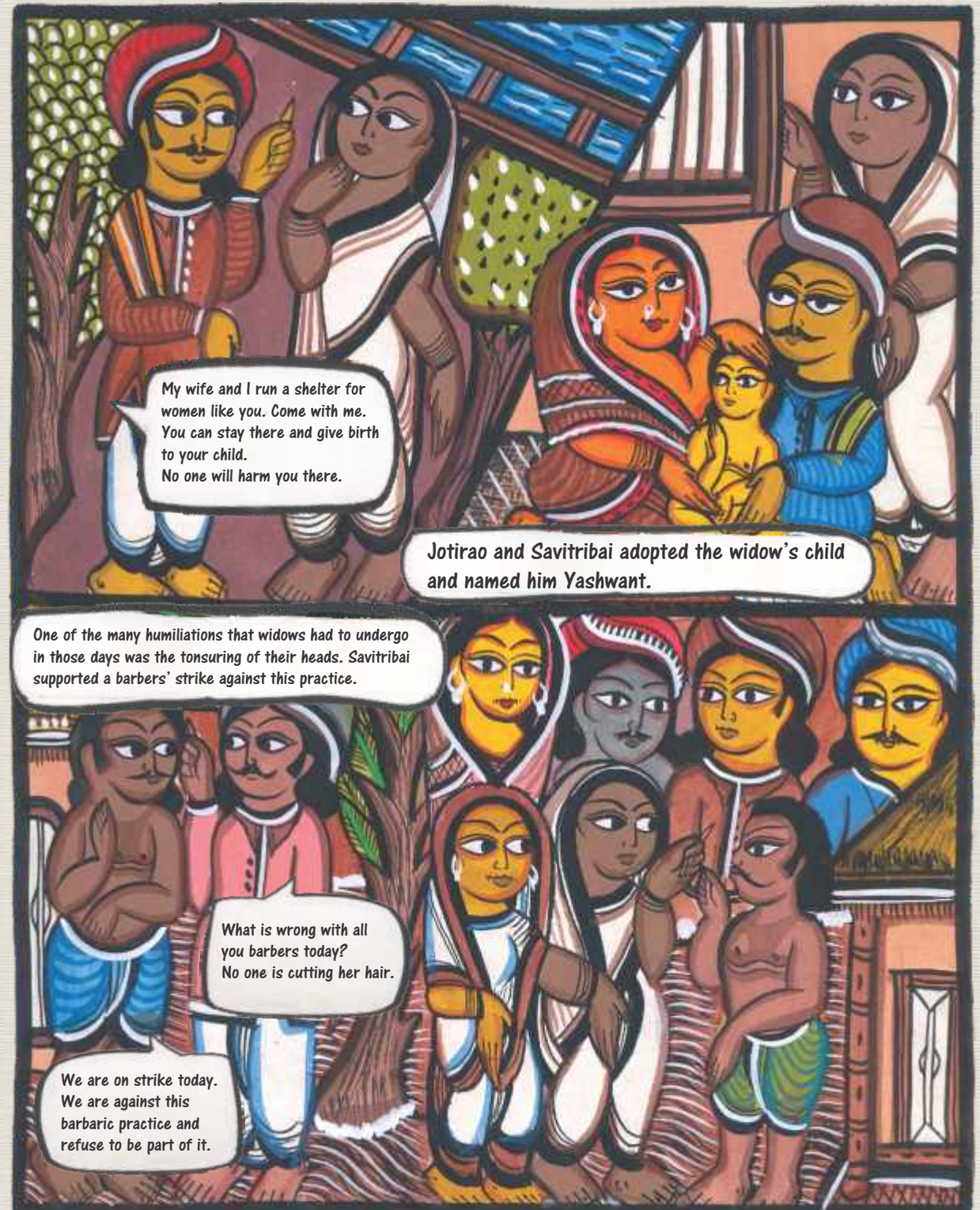
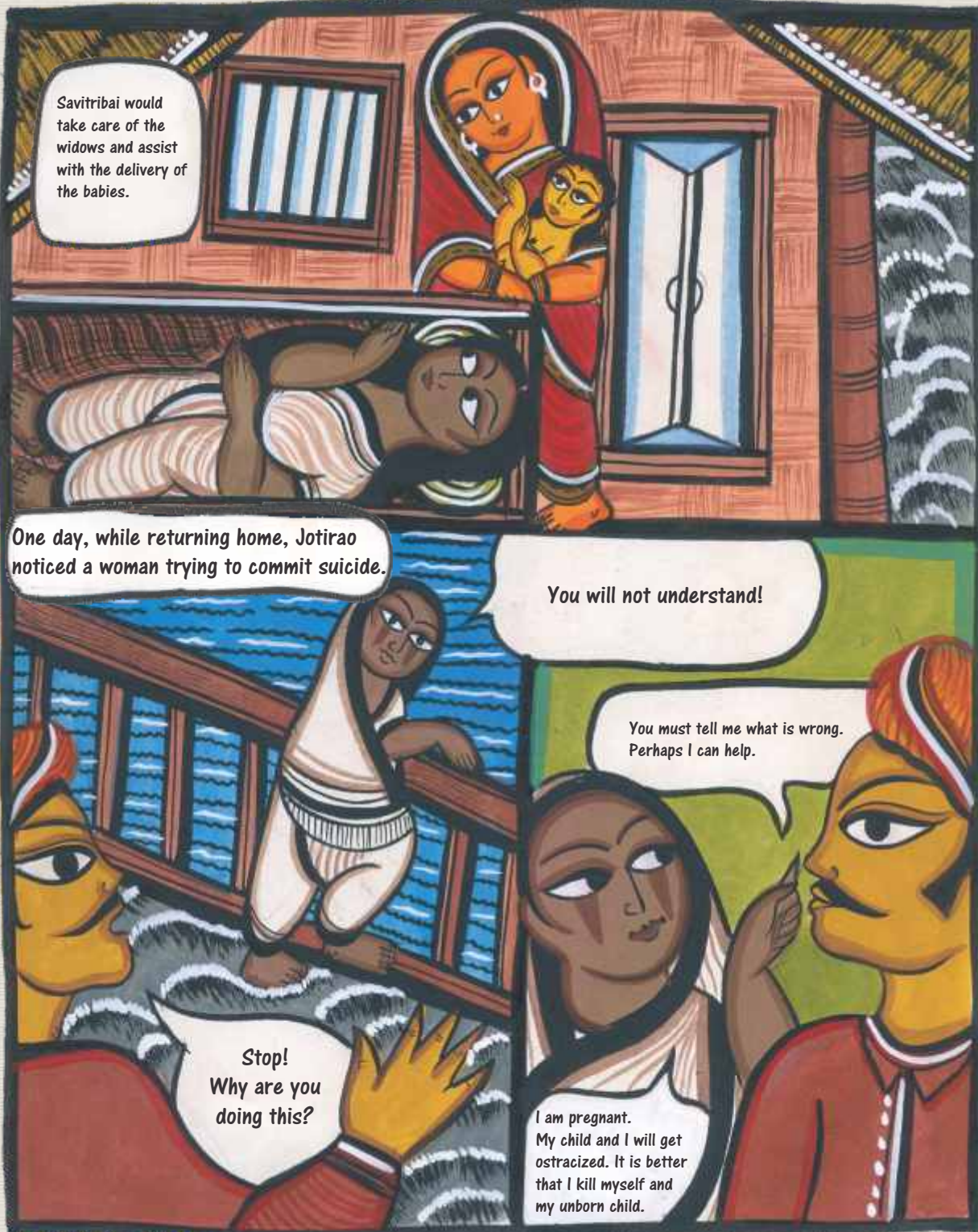
Yes, I do. That young and beautiful woman.

It is appalling how widows are treated in our society.

Well, some scheming Shastri got her pregnant and then refused to take responsibility for the child. She felt helpless and ended up killing the child. The police have arrested her.

Kashibai was sentenced to life imprisonment in Kalapani (a jail in the Andamans). This prompted the Phules to start a shelter for pregnant widows in their home.

SHELTER FOR
EXPLOITED WIDOWS
AT
395 GANJ PETH,
PUNE



We must do something to prevent children from dropping out of school. I think we should try to make the lessons more interesting, to keep the children engaged.



Perhaps we can provide some incentive to the students to attend school, maybe a stipend.

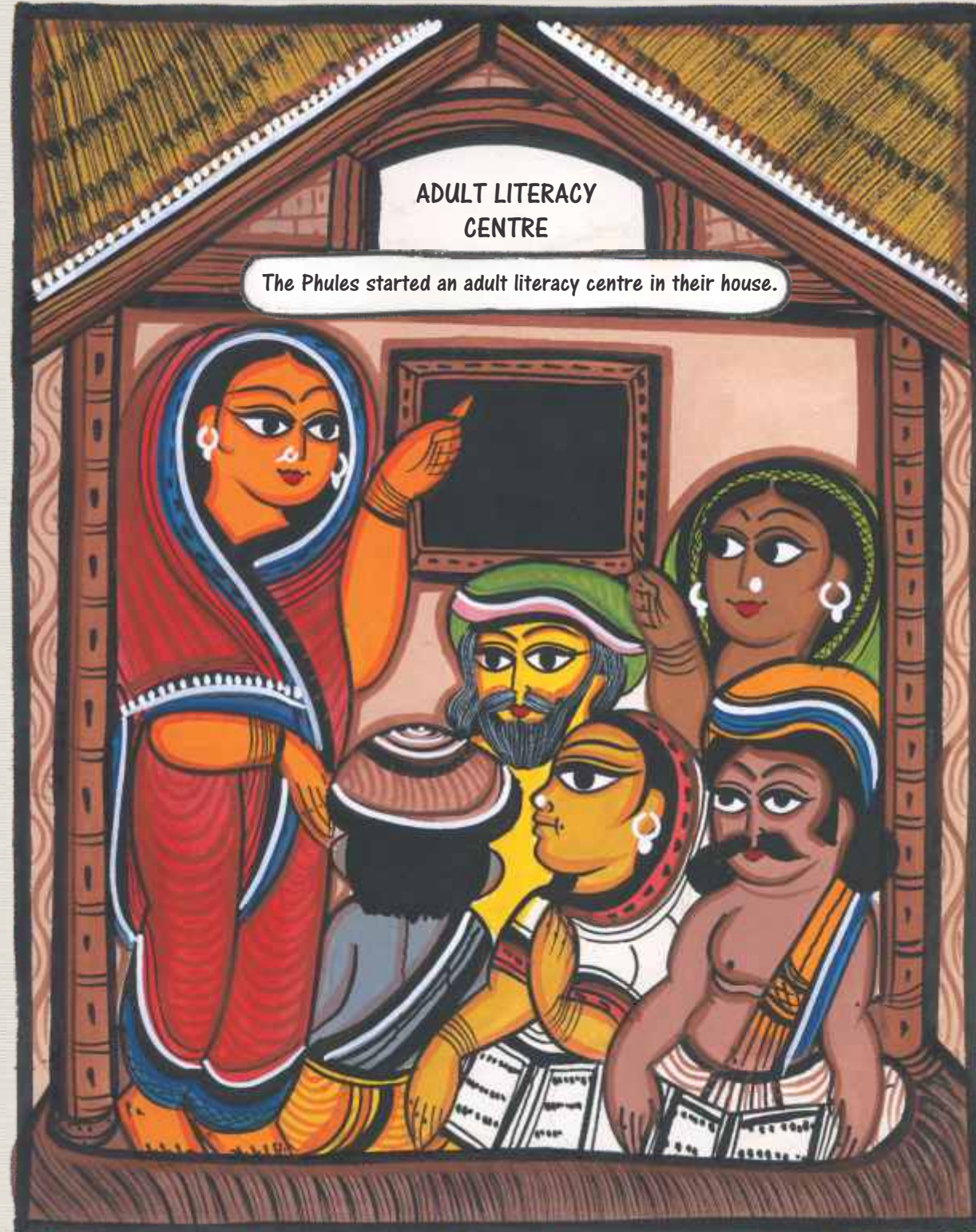


A related problem is that parents are illiterate and do not realise the value of education. We should think of starting adult literacy classes too.



ADULT LITERACY CENTRE

The Phules started an adult literacy centre in their house.



Sometime in 1868, Savitribai was recuperating from an illness in Naigaon.

Do you know Ganesh the Brahmin?

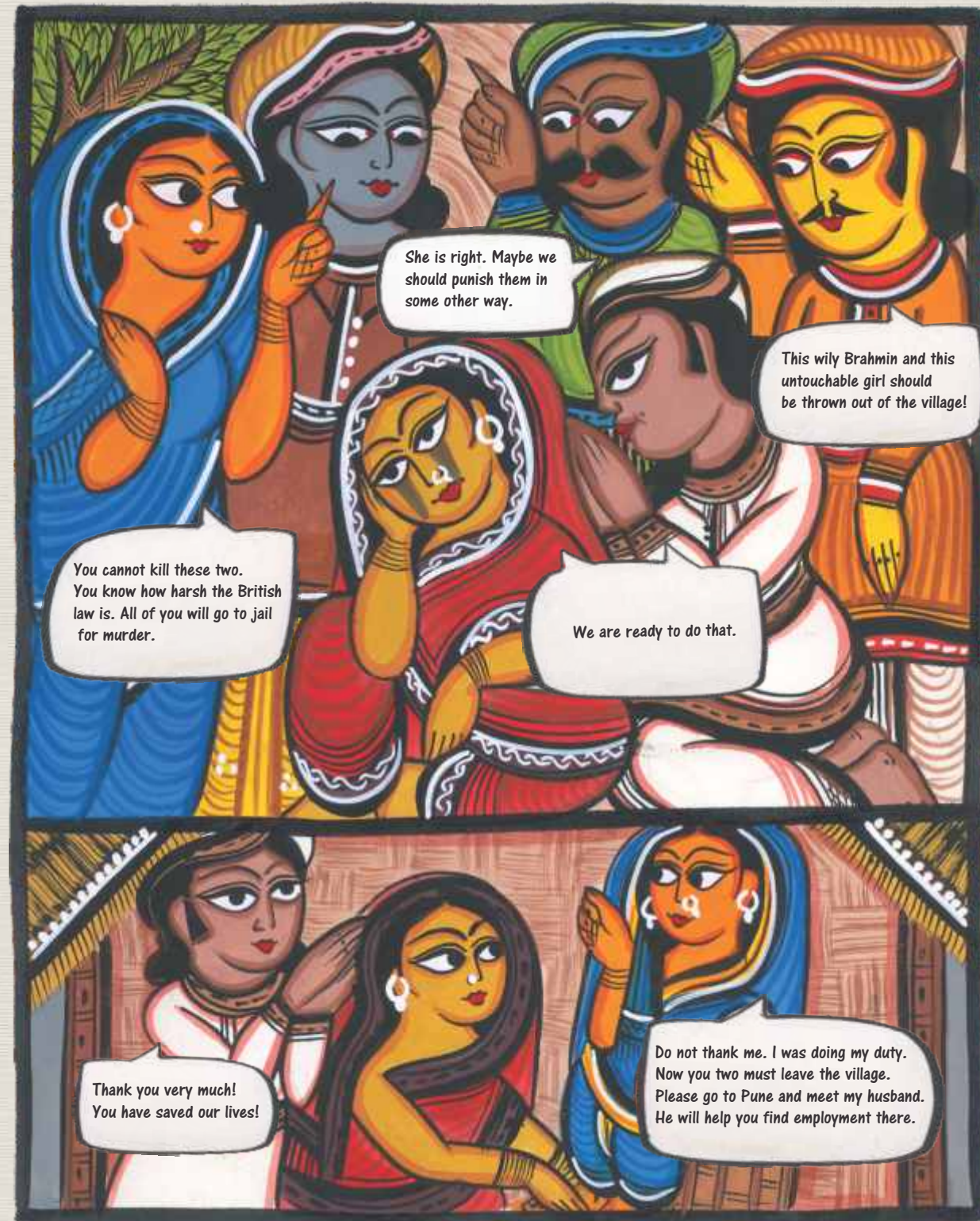
No I don't. What about him?

Well, he has fallen in love with Sharja, a Mahar girl. The girl has got pregnant and now six months into her pregnancy, the villagers have discovered the affair. The couple is being paraded through the village and a mob is threatening to kill them.

I must do something to prevent that.

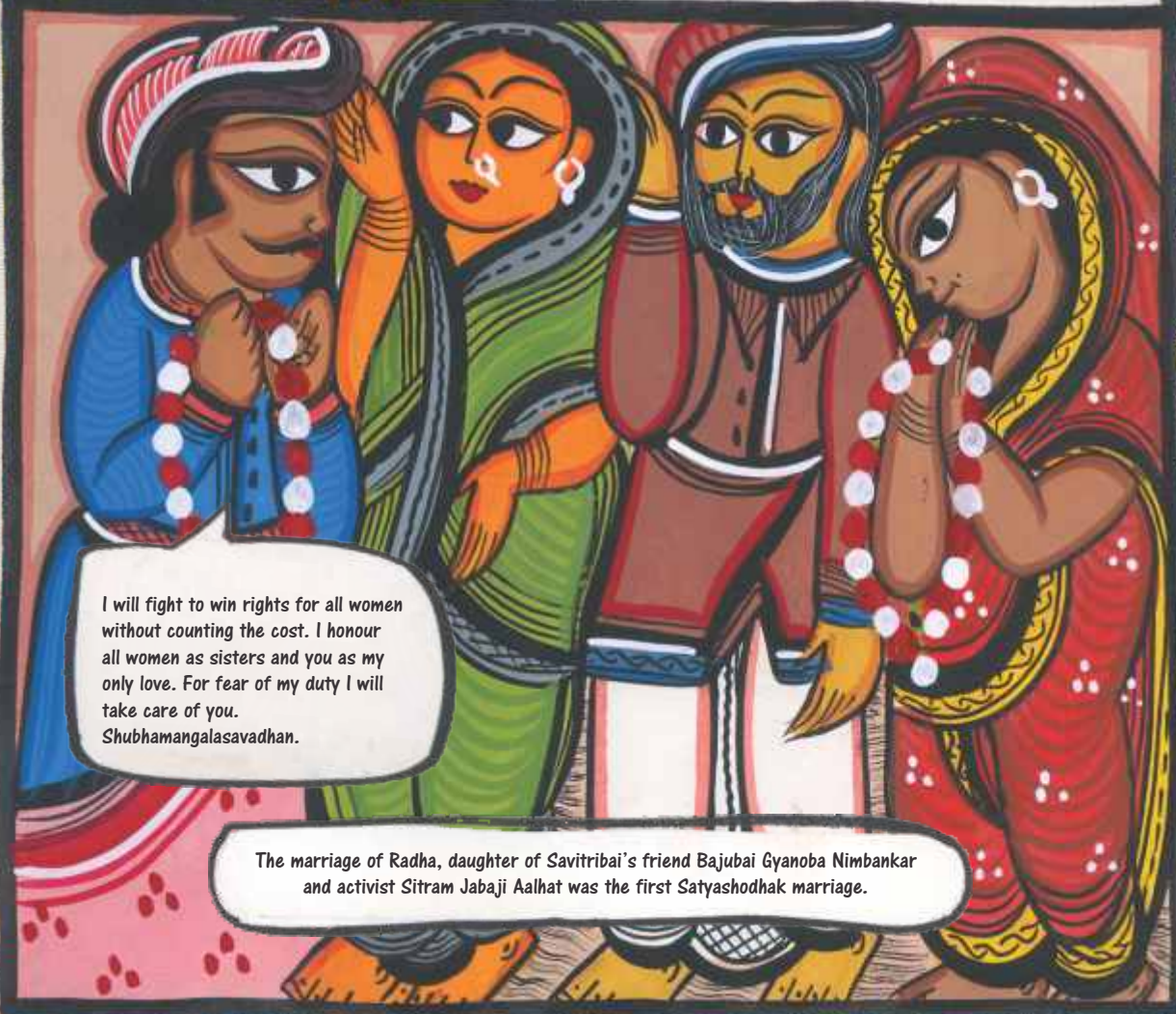
Why do you want to get involved in all this? Just stay quiet. It is none of our business.

The injustice meted out in society is my business. It is also your business. If you and I remain silent spectators, society will never change.



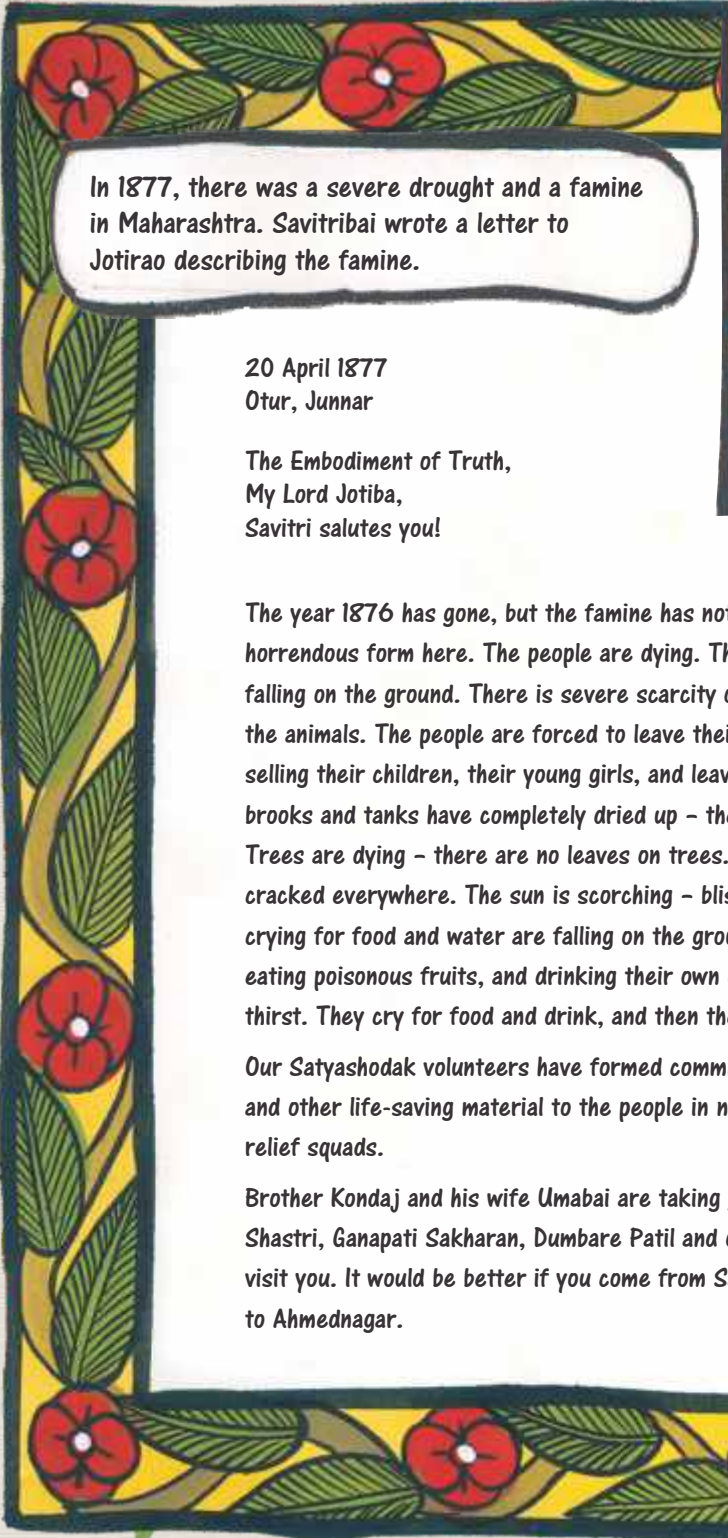


Jotirao set up the Satyashodak Samaj (The Truthseekers' Society) in 1873. The objective of the Samaj was 'to redeem the shudras and atishudras from the influence of the brahmanical scriptures, teach them their human rights and liberate them from mental and religious slavery.' The Samaj declared, "All men are Children of God. There is no need for an intermediary or priest to worship God." Savitribai was an active member of the organization. She started the practice of Satyashodak marriages - marriages conducted without any Brahmin priests. The Satyashodak marriage required the bridegroom to take an oath of giving education and equal rights to women. The mantras traditionally chanted by the Brahmin priest were to be sung by the bride and the bridegroom themselves.



I will fight to win rights for all women without counting the cost. I honour all women as sisters and you as my only love. For fear of my duty I will take care of you. Shubhamangalasavadhan.

The marriage of Radha, daughter of Savitribai's friend Bajubai Gyanoba Nimbarkar and activist Sitram Jabaji Aalhat was the first Satyashodhak marriage.



In 1877, there was a severe drought and a famine in Maharashtra. Savitribai wrote a letter to Jotirao describing the famine.

20 April 1877
Otur, Junnar

The Embodiment of Truth,
My Lord Jotiba,
Savitri salutes you!



The year 1876 has gone, but the famine has not - it stays in the most horrendous form here. The people are dying. The animals are dying, falling on the ground. There is severe scarcity of food and no fodder for the animals. The people are forced to leave their villages. Some are selling their children, their young girls, and leaving the villages. Rivers, brooks and tanks have completely dried up - there is no water to drink. Trees are dying - there are no leaves on trees. The barren land is cracked everywhere. The sun is scorching - blistering. The people crying for food and water are falling on the ground to die. Some are eating poisonous fruits, and drinking their own urine to quench their thirst. They cry for food and drink, and then they die.

Our Satyashodak volunteers have formed committees to provide food and other life-saving material to the people in need. They have formed relief squads.

Brother Kondaj and his wife Umabai are taking good care of me. Otur's Shastri, Ganapati Sakharan, Dumbare Patil and others, are planning to visit you. It would be better if you come from Satara to Otur and then go to Ahmednagar.

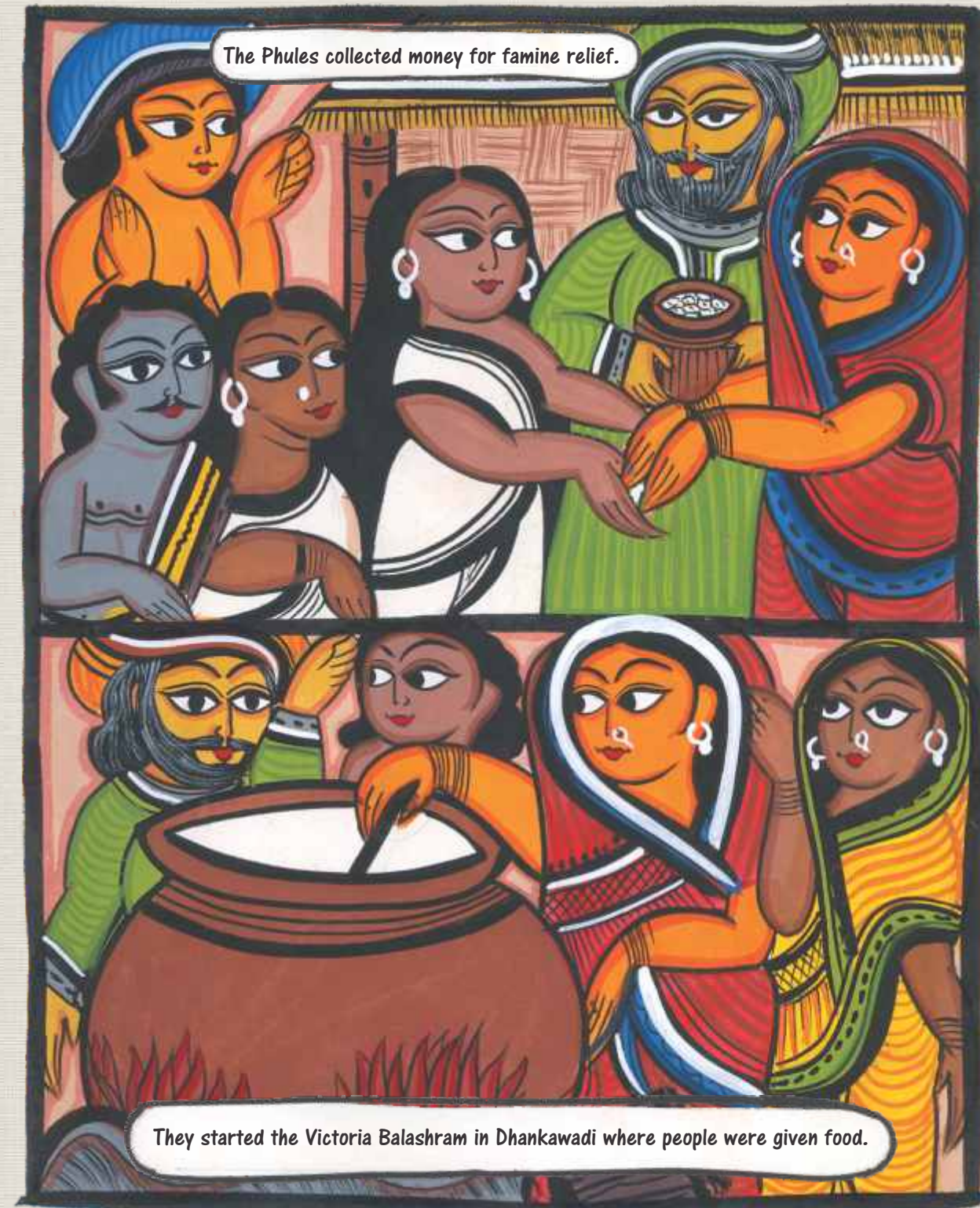
You may remember R.B. Krishnaji Pant and Laxman Shastri. They travelled with me to the affected area and gave some monetary help to the victims.

The moneylenders are viciously exploiting the situation. Bad things are taking place as a result of the famine. Riots are breaking out. The Collector heard of this and came to ease the situation. He deployed the white police officers, and tried to bring the situation under control. Fifty Satyashodaks were rounded up. The Collector invited me for a talk. I asked the Collector why the good volunteers had been framed with false charges and arrested without any rhyme or reason. I asked him to release them immediately. The Collector was quite decent and unbiased. He shouted at the white soldiers, 'Do the Patil farmers rob? Set them free.' The Collector was moved by the people's plight. He immediately sent four bullock cartloads of (jowar) food.

You have started the benevolent welfare work for the poor and the needy. I also want to carry my share of the responsibility. I assure you I will always help you. I wish the godly work will be helped by more people.

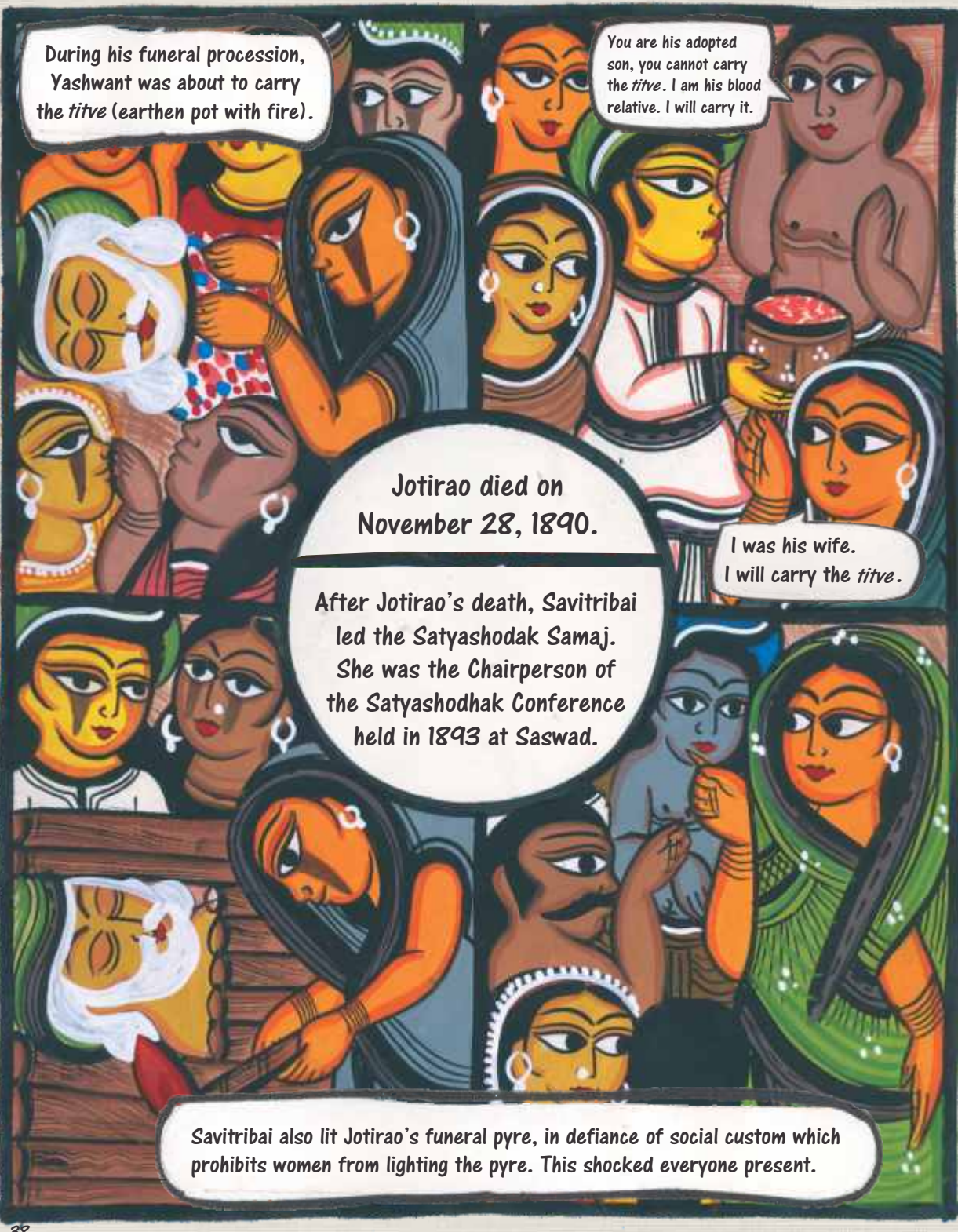
I do not want to write more.

Yours,
Savitri



The Phules collected money for famine relief.

They started the Victoria Balashram in Dhankawadi where people were given food.



During his funeral procession, Yashwant was about to carry the *tithe* (earthen pot with fire).

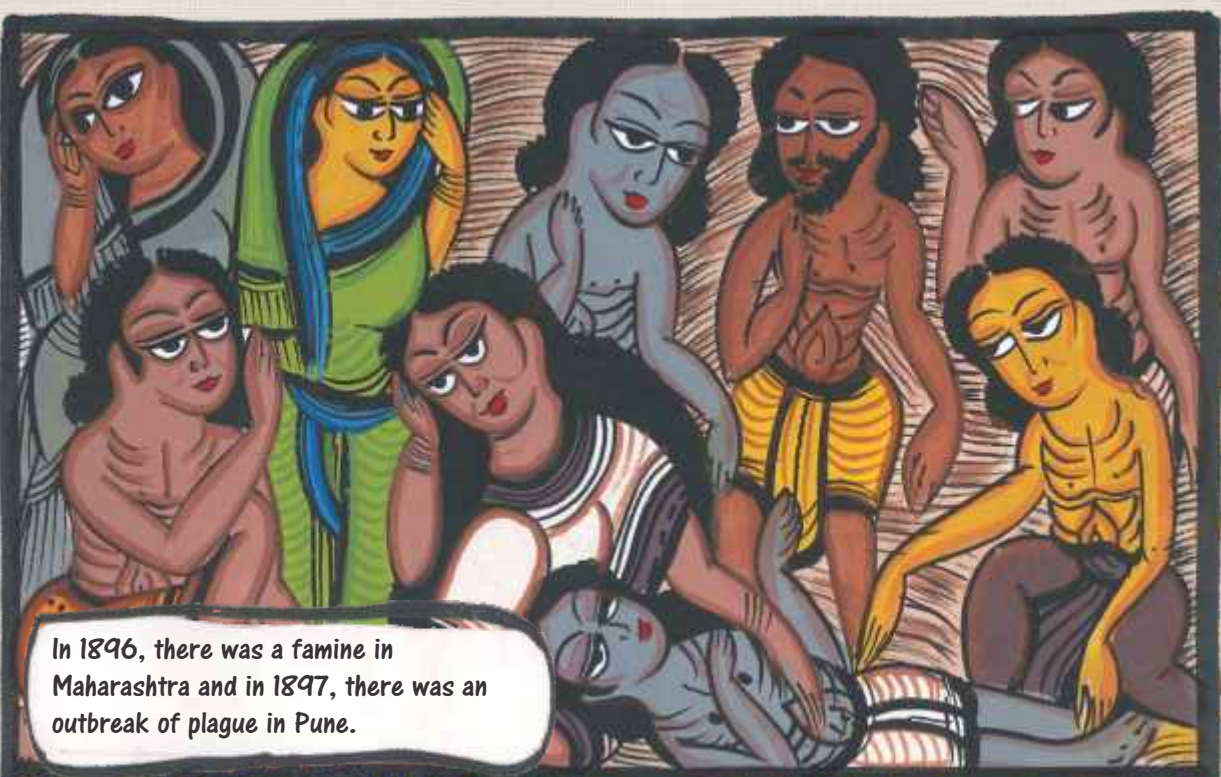
You are his adopted son, you cannot carry the *tithe*. I am his blood relative. I will carry it.

Jotirao died on November 28, 1890.

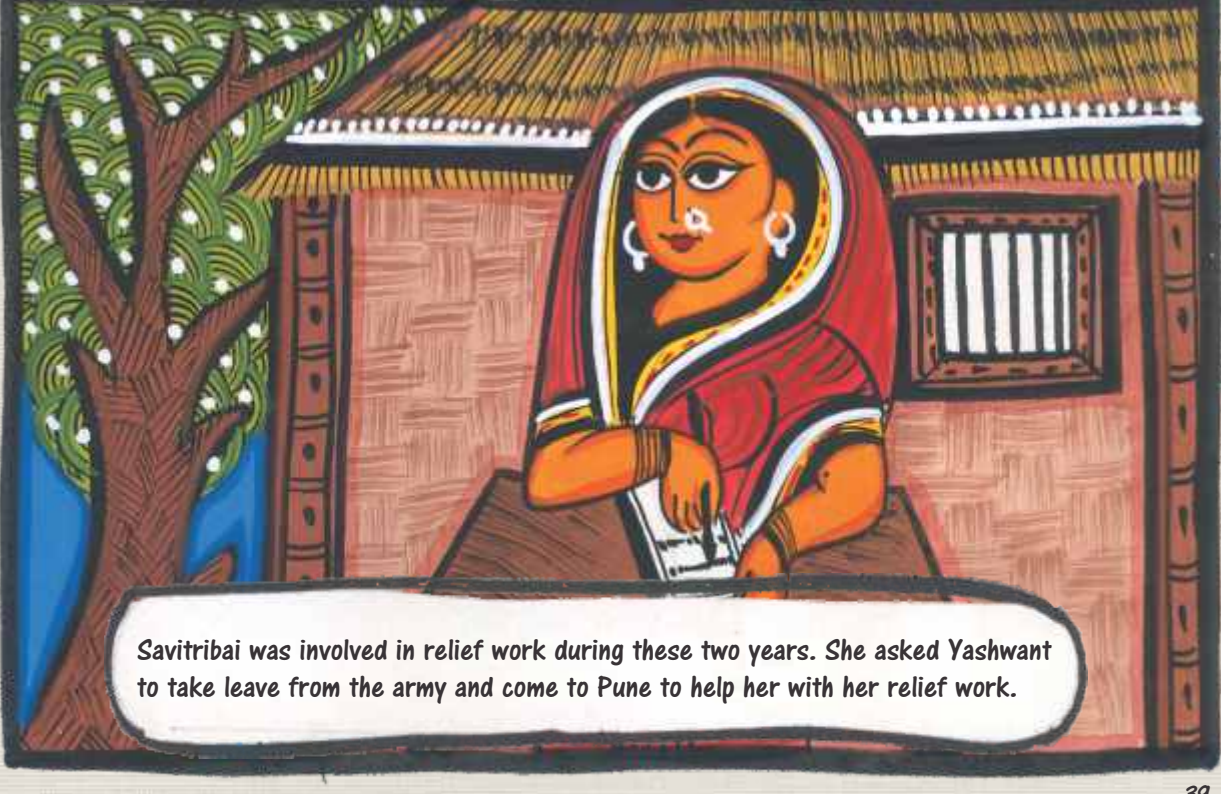
After Jotirao's death, Savitribai led the Satyashodak Samaj. She was the Chairperson of the Satyashodhak Conference held in 1893 at Saswad.

I was his wife. I will carry the *tithe*.

Savitribai also lit Jotirao's funeral pyre, in defiance of social custom which prohibits women from lighting the pyre. This shocked everyone present.



In 1896, there was a famine in Maharashtra and in 1897, there was an outbreak of plague in Pune.



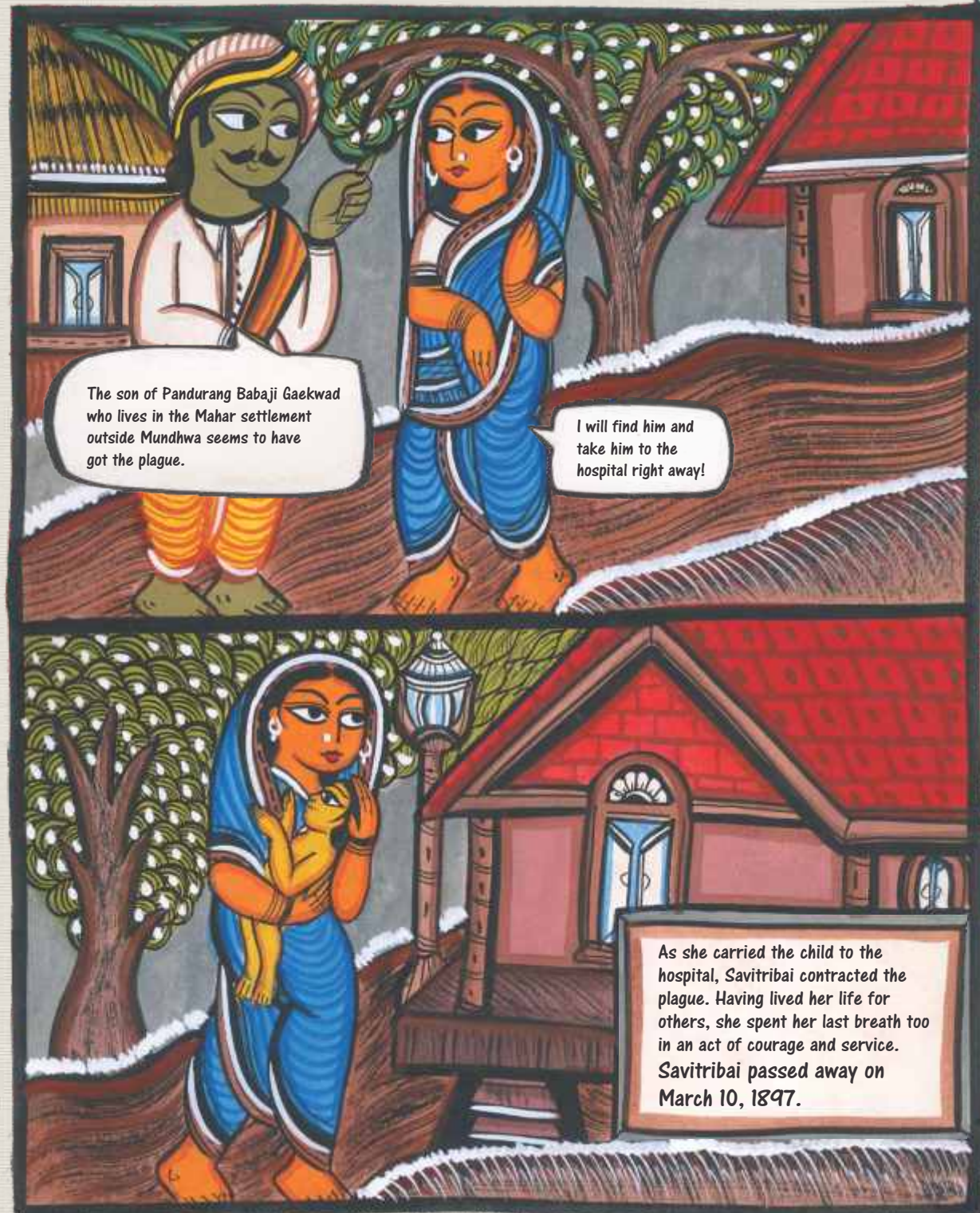
Savitribai was involved in relief work during these two years. She asked Yashwant to take leave from the army and come to Pune to help her with her relief work.

Yashwant started a hospital to treat victims of the plague.



The son of Pandurang Babaji Gaekwad who lives in the Mahar settlement outside Mundhwa seems to have got the plague.

I will find him and take him to the hospital right away!



As she carried the child to the hospital, Savitribai contracted the plague. Having lived her life for others, she spent her last breath too in an act of courage and service. Savitribai passed away on March 10, 1897.

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Azim Premji Foundation is a not-for-profit organization working towards deep, large scale and institutionalized impact on the quality and equity of education in India. We are also engaged in related development areas such as health, nutrition, governance and environment. The roots of Azim Premji University lie in the learning and experience of a decade of work in school education by Azim Premji Foundation.

Azim Premji University is one of the Foundation's key responses to the constraints and challenges confronting the education and development sectors in India, like the lack of grounded knowledge and theory, and a shortage of capable and reflective individuals. The University is actively engaged in the development of talent and the creation of knowledge which can catalyze sustainable improvements in education and related development areas. The University has a strong social cause and is among the only ones in the country dedicated to Education and Development and a vision to facilitate a just, equitable, humane and sustainable society.

The 'People and Ideas' initiative of Azim Premji University, is an attempt to explore the ideas, lives and works of the many social reformers, artists, scientists, philosophers and educationists who have influenced us deeply. During this process we hope to develop a platform to understand, engage with, and discuss the ideas that have fundamentally shaped our vision and philosophy.

This graphic novel is on Savitribai Phule's life and work. Savitribai Phule lived a life of service and extraordinary courage, challenging oppressive social norms in a quest for education, equality, and justice.



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